

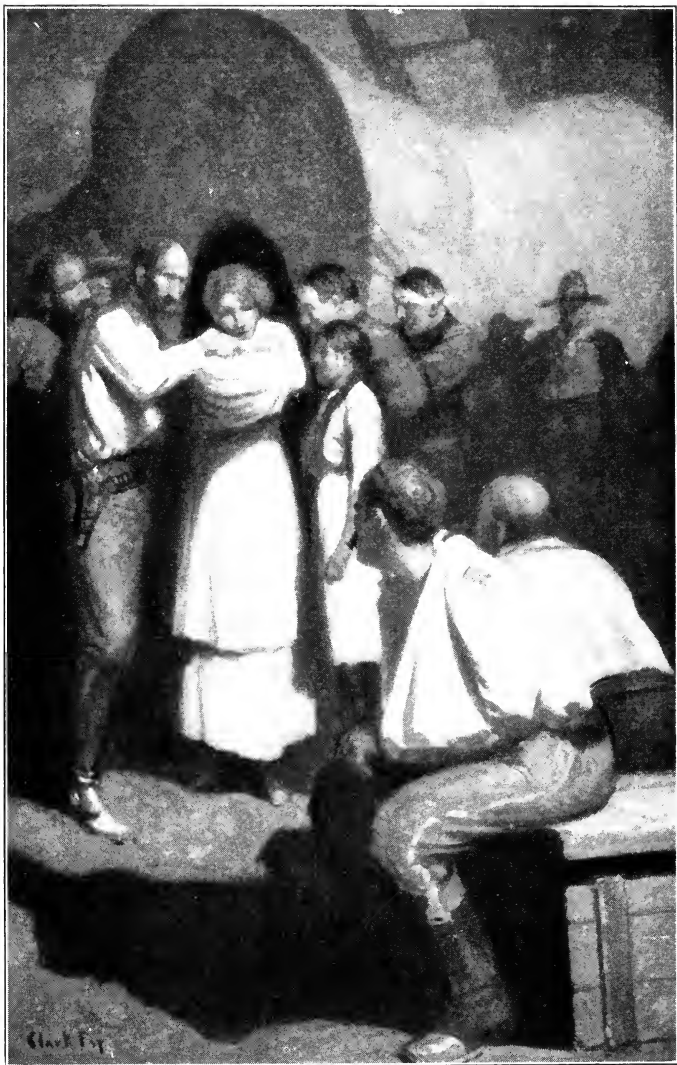
A BABY OF THE FRONTIER



CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY



A BABY OF THE FRONTIER



THE SOLDIERS LOOKED AT THE BABY WONDERINGLY

A BABY OF THE FRONTIER

BY

CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY

AUTHOR OF

“The Little Angel of Canyon Creek,” “Britton of the
Seventh,” “The Eagle of the Empire,” etc., etc.

Illustrated



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TO MY VALUED FRIEND
CHARLES HELY MOLONY

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NOTE

Incredible as some of the adventures centring about the baby as hereafter narrated may seem, there is abundant justification in fact for them all. Most of them really happened. Many of them were related to the author by old army friends on winter nights around huge log fires in frontier posts of other days, vanished long since like most of the characters in the story, red and white.

The author joys in the relation of the stories of the brave, hard-fighting, uncommon soldiers of the small but unmatched regular army, with which this book is chiefly concerned. The battle with Dull Knife's band is described from Mackenzie's famous winter fight with the fierce but gallant Cheyennes.

There was a baby of the frontier. The author knew that baby. Some day, perhaps, further adventures in which the baby, now grown up, participated shall be set forth for the delectation of the reader.

C. T. B.

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BOOK ONE
THE COMING OF THE BABY

I

DISCLOSES WHAT THE SOLDIER SAW IN THE MOUNTAIN PASS

SERGEANT McNEIL suddenly tightened the bridle rein of his horse, throwing him violently back on his haunches. Like all good cavalrymen the veteran non-commissioned officer dearly loved a good horse. The severe and unexpected pressure of the ruthless curb measured the sergeant's surprise. The horse reared and then plunged violently forward. A less practised rider would have been unseated. McNeil was so amazed that for a moment he let the excited horse have his way. And when at last he controlled him again, he was characteristically gentle with him, as if to make amends to a gallant comrade for unwonted roughness.

The sergeant had been staring straight ahead down the pass. For all he had been riding nonchalantly, almost indifferently, some little distance ahead of his train, nothing in

front of him escaped his vision. Rounding a huge bend in the canyon he had an unobstructed view of its extent for a mile or more as it fell straightaway before him. At the lower end, where the great rift through the mountains twisted again, his searching eyes had caught a flash of color. Something had suddenly appeared against the canyon wall, far away at the bend of the trail to the northward. It was a long view, but Sergeant McNeil would have taken his oath that the color came from an Indian blanket.

Had the splendid soldier been accompanied by none but the score of hard riders of the veteran troop of which he was the senior non-commissioned officer he might have started at the sight of the Indians, but he would have started forward, not back. And he would have called on his men to follow him, confident alike in their willingness, their obedience, and their ability. Although the red men had abundantly proved their prowess and soldierly qualities many a time, all the white men, imbued with that indomitable pride of race to the full, held them in more or less contempt as fighters.

Certainly that was the feeling with which they were regarded by the rank and file of the Army in those days, and McNeil longed for nothing better than a little brush with a war party of Sioux or Cheyennes on his own account. He was too old and fixed in mind and habit, too humble in education and training, to aspire to a commission; still the story of the defeat of a wandering war party by a half platoon of B troop of the old "Fighting Fourteenth Horse," under the command of Sergeant McNeil, he felt would read well in the dispatches and general orders.

Unfortunately, however, the sergeant in command was seriously encumbered. For that reason he had started back instead of forward. He was not free to indulge himself in any rough riding or hard fighting. Stop! That last might be forced upon him, but the rough riding was out of the question. The sergeant's chief duty—his only duty at that moment—was to escort that small wagon train, which he had picked up at the railroad station, safely to Fort Sullivan, among the hills. The train contained supplies, mail, and women. There was first, the wife of the major

commanding the squadron to which they belonged; second, the wife of Sergeant McNeil, commanding the detachment; lastly, his young daughter, Molly, a slip of a girl approaching fourteen.

When the regiment had taken the field in the spring, Mrs. Compton had gone East and had taken with her Bridget McNeil. McNeil had been Compton's first sergeant when he commanded B troop of the Fourteenth Regular Cavalry, and among the faithful people to welcome Marion Compton to the frontier when she had come there a bride from the East, had been stout-hearted, warm-blooded Bridget McNeil, the sergeant's wife. That was five years before. Although differences in rank and station separated them widely, the warmest friendship had sprung up between the two women, characterized by absolute devotion on the one hand and warm-hearted appreciation on the other.

Mrs. Compton's mother had died in Marion's infancy. Her father, who lived in Washington, D. C., was a retired Army officer. She had few friends outside the service. When it was borne to her consciousness that

there would probably be a little Compton in the fall, she had decided to await the event in Omaha, Nebraska, where she could be well cared for and yet sufficiently near her husband for emergencies. And as Sergeant McNeil was with Major Compton's squadron in the field, she had easily prevailed upon the devoted Bridget to accompany her, and, of course, Molly, her daughter, had gone along.

Some time after arriving in Omaha a telegram brought her word of a battle in the Northwest, in which her husband's command had participated with many others. It was an unlucky battle for Major Compton, for he had been desperately wounded leading a charge against swarming masses of red men. He had been shot through the body and through the face. After a hasty examination they had laid him down on the field to die, but when the battle was over—and it was a drawn battle at that, the Indians having successfully stopped the advance of the little army—the busy surgeon, for there were many wounded, to say nothing of the killed, found Compton still alive.

Fearing the effect of such untoward news

on his wife, the gallant soldier had begged that the fact that he had been so seriously wounded might be kept from her. But there happened to be with the force a war correspondent, who, bending over Compton, lying in the shade cast by a nervous broncho, was astonished to hear him declare that soldiering was a great life and fighting the only trade! This doughty assertion was followed by urgent advice to the correspondent to join the army then and there! Incidentally, Compton announced that he did not intend to die at that time.

The campaign was over for that year. The troops were under orders to return to their posts. Fort Sullivan was about as near the battlefield as any. Compton was carried back there sometimes in litters by hand, sometimes on a travois, sometimes in a wagon. The horrors of that journey are not to be dwelt upon. It was the thought of his wife and her delicate state of health, he afterward declared, which kept him alive amid all the ghastly agonies.

Of course the story of the correspondent got into the papers and Mrs. Compton read

all about it in the first dispatch that came long after the battle, for the army had been out of telegraphic touch while in the field. She moved heaven and earth for tidings, and finally learned from the department that her husband eventually would be found at Fort Sullivan dead or alive.

Although the journey was attended by the greatest hazard, she made up her mind to make it without hesitation, as became a soldier's wife. By the time she got the news, she calculated that the returning troops must almost have reached the post. She hastily assembled her belongings, including the dainty layette, over which she and Bridget McNeil had toiled, and took the first train westward. Before she started she wired the commanding officer at Fort Sullivan—a certain Calmore, of her husband's squadron, to whom, with his troop, the post had been intrusted when the main force moved off—when she would arrive at the nearest railroad station, a hundred and fifty miles away from the fort, and asked that an escort might be there to take her to the post.

The whole undertaking was fearfully risky

for her. The journey by wagon would be hard and exhausting for a woman in time of peace. What would it be for her in time of war? The Indians had been by no means crushed, scarcely even subdued. Fort Sullivan was one of the furthest outposts of civilization on the far-flung frontier. It had been several times under fire that summer. Wandering war parties frequently encircled it, passing to the south between it and the railroad.

Poor Calmore was in a terrible state of anxiety. He had the post to look after and numberless refugees, including many women and children. For all this he had too weak a force at best, and there was but one second lieutenant with him, and he had to keep him at the post. Hadden was a gallant young fellow, but he had only just joined the regiment and had had no experience in the field, anyway. Calmore could only spare half a platoon for this escort duty, a force he recognized to be woefully inadequate. If the regiment had come back the task would have been easy, but he did not dare delay sending to the station. Calmore knew the situation thor-

oughly. He realized that Mrs. Compton must be brought to the post without delay—the sooner the better. The escort must be there when she arrived.

Fortunately his force included some men of rare quality. Sergeant McNeil had been wounded early in the spring, and had been sent back to the post to recuperate. He was now completely recovered. He was a man thoroughly to be trusted, fearless at all times, cautious when caution was required,—experienced in Indian fighting and devoted to the interests of Major Compton and his wife. Calmore shrewdly suspected that McNeil's wife would be with Mrs. Compton and he knew, if anything were needed, that would make the sergeant more dependable than ever. He had given him a score of men, the very pick of his little command, and dispatched him to meet Mrs. Compton, cautioning him on no account, if it were possible to avoid it, to join battle with any war party of Indians. It happened also that a small wagon train had been made up at the railroad station, and McNeil was directed to bring it in as well.

Such was the situation that made Sergeant McNeil stop almost appalled in the pass through which the trail to Fort Sullivan ran some thirty-five miles or more from that point, when he saw at the other end of it the bright blanket and plumed head-dress of a Sioux!

As his mind ranged from the warrior ahead to the train behind, the sergeant's face fell and his heart sank. He could have put stout-hearted, able-bodied, vigorous Bridget, his wife, who was equal to the best of his troopers in an emergency, on a horse. He could have put Molly—still a slip of a girl—in the care of some soldier, and if the worst came to the worst he could have burned up the wagons and fought his way through, or died fighting, reserving final bullets for wife and daughter. Any man with a woman intrusted to his care would by no possibility neglect that precaution, in those old days in the Far West, when menaced by capture by the Indians.

But the presence of Mrs. Compton complicated matters. Only her indomitable spirit and her passionate determination to get to

her husband had kept her from collapsing. Every man in the detachment—steady-going, hardy, well-disciplined, self-respecting body of veterans with only one youngster among them—was devoted to Marion Compton. She had been an angel of mercy and tenderness to them when they had been wounded or ill. Her glorious voice had led the singing at many a Sunday service and had delighted them at many an informal entertainment at the lonely, isolated, frontier fort. Although she was too good a soldier, both by inheritance and association, ever improperly to interfere between her husband and his command, her gentle influence had always been exerted on the side of mercy to the soldiers in trouble. They knew that, too.

All these men had welcomed her as a bride and they felt proud in the thought that she had come among them again. They could remember how her face had lighted up as she saw them sitting their horses back of the station platform when she had arrived. They could still dwell upon the rare flush of color and the smile with which she had acknowledged their hearty cheers. With rude but

heartfelt chivalry they were devoted to her. They were proud that she had been committed to them.

Everything that men could do to make the journey easy to her had been done by these brave troopers. Sometimes they had almost carried the ambulance, in which she rested, over the rough places. They had eased the vehicle down declivities and made smooth going for her by actually clearing rocks and stones from the trail with their naked hands. They had made much slower progress on account of their care, but that did not make any difference. No body of young soldiers could have been more at the service of a charming young belle who had captured all their hearts than these veterans to Marion Compton. To be sure, she was not much more than a girl herself, in spite of her five years of married life.

She was fearfully apprehensive and in great mental anguish because of her husband, of whom she had received no word since leaving Omaha, save Sergeant McNeil's report that the command was approaching Fort Sullivan and that Major Compton was still liv-

ing. She was most profoundly grateful to these grim guardians and protectors, who held her in such tender and knightly regard. As women should be, she was a thing sacred to man, especially then.

But it was upon great-hearted, practical, sensible, efficient Bridget McNeil that Marion Compton most depended. The elder woman was indeed a very present help in her time of need; her unfailing good nature, her cheerfulness, her bright and pleasing humor, her self-sacrifice and devotion, the skill and ability with which she spared her in every way, brought comfort to the poor woman's tortured heart and wearied body. And like every woman who lived on the frontier in those days, Bridget McNeil had acquired an experience and an ability not to be held lightly.

Mrs. Compton was a slender, delicate woman. Sometimes at night the old Irish woman had gathered her up in her arms as if she had been a baby and soothed and comforted her in ways that only women know and use. As for Molly McNeil, she was Marion Compton's devoted slave. And there was

nothing she, like the men, would not have done for her.

The army ambulance was an uncomfortable vehicle for a sick and nervous woman even under the best conditions. Marion Compton was always glad when they camped for the night and she could get out of it. Those nightly rests were very pleasant. It was cool without being chilly, the stars shone with unwonted brilliance in the clear air of the high upland, the fire threw pleasant lights upon the groups gathered hard by. Sometimes Mrs. Compton sang to them, although she found it hard and naturally was not in good voice. The men enjoyed it exceedingly and Molly joined in, and Bridget and sometimes the men themselves sang, too, or tried it.

II

WHEREIN THE OLD SCOUT JOINS THE LITTLE COMMAND

SERGEANT McNEIL, having quieted his horse, at last threw up his hand and beckoned. The canyon made a little bend back of him and the wagon train was not in sight from the broad opening at the further end, where he had seen the Sioux. Corporal Jackson, riding with the men, saw the sergeant's signal. Divining that something was wrong, he promptly halted the train and trotted forward to join his superior.

"What's up?" he asked, saluting with his hand, for McNeil stood high in the regiment and every man was as glad to serve under him and was as proud of him as of Major Compton or of Allenby, the old Civil War general, in command. For answer McNeil pointed ahead. Jackson followed with his eyes his superior's index finger. His lips broke into a startled

exclamation. Where McNeil had seen one Indian the two men now saw a score.

The canyon opened widely from the point where the soldiers stood, and far beyond its passage through the foothills lay the rolling country, watered here and there, the lines of the brooks indicated by dusty undergrowth and stunted trees, which extended from the range to Fort Sullivan. The Indians were coming from the north, and as the two soldiers watched, more and more of them came into view until the whole end of the canyon was filled with them. They were in violent motion and commotion, galloping back and forth, raising clouds of dust above them.

“Good Lord!” exclaimed Jackson. “Look at ’em comin’.”

“There must be five hundred av them,” muttered McNeil, thoughtfully biting his grey mustache.

“What in heaven’s name can we do?”

The old sergeant shook his head.

“I know phwhat we can’t do,” he said gravely.

“What’s that?”

“Fight our way through that bunch.”

“Of course not,” answered Jackson, “and there’s——” he stopped.

“The women an’ the child,” said the sergeant.

“Have they seen us?”

“For sure. I don’t give ’em credit fer bein’ any blinder than I am, an’ I saw wan five minutes ago up against this yellow rock. I guess he saw me, too, all right.”

“What’s that?” cried Jackson, suddenly pointing.

“It may be a thrick,” said the sergeant, seizing his rifle. “Get your gun out, Jackson, an’——”

“It’s no trick,” cried the corporal, nevertheless obeying the order. “That’s a white man.”

The two soldiers, standing high upon the trail, saw the whole scene as if it were a picture. About a hundred feet from the Indians a figure on a horse suddenly galloped madly up the canyon toward them. Apparently the horse and his rider had been hiding in the canyon, and the Indians had caught sight of them, and they were making a mad dash for life. The rider was bending low over the

pommel of his saddle, the horse was a good one, and he was being urged to the last possibility of his speed. Some hundreds of feet behind him a score or more of Indians followed, also at top speed of their ponies. They had discarded their blankets, but their long-feathered bonnets streamed out behind them like plumes on knights of old. Their naked, painted bodies gleamed in the afternoon sunlight as they shook their weapons high in the air. Although they urged their horses frantically with wild yells which could be heard faintly by the men up the canyon, they were dropping behind. Realizing this, the leader of the pursuit suddenly advanced his rifle and fired. The others followed his example and the canyon echoed and reverberated with the crackle of Winchesters and Remingtons.

Somehow or other the Indians were always well armed, much better even than the soldiers.

“It couldn’t be a thrick,” said the sergeant. “They can’t pass us here. Jackson, ride back to the thrain an’ bring up four av the best shots. Tell the others to git ready an’ we can check ’em here for a while, anyway.

Begorry, they've got him," cried the sergeant suddenly. "Wait," he said, catching at the bridle of the other man's horse.

"I told you it wasn't a trick," said Jackson. "He's down."

"But he's up; look!"

A bullet had killed the fugitive's gallant horse and he had been hurled over the animal's head, but he was up on his feet in a moment. With shouts of triumph, the Indians, who had momentarily checked their pursuit at the sight of the disaster, started forward again. To run was impossible. There was but one way of safety. The man coolly presented his own Winchester. The soldiers saw the puff of smoke before they heard the report, and the leading Indian pitched out of his saddle stone dead. The Indians returned the fire, but excitement impaired their accuracy, and the fugitive stood unharmed, firing rapidly. He was a rare shot, for each second brought down a horse or an Indian. The pursuit was checked and then halted, although the minute the man turned his back to run it would be resumed.

"I think we'll ride down a little, Jackson,"

said Sergeant McNeil grimly, "an' give that man a chance. He looks to me like old Marnette. He's worth half a platoon to us if it is. Come on."

The two men trotted rapidly down the descending trail. The Indians saw them and heard them, too, for although it was a long shot and both men missed, the soldiers presented their carbines and fired down the valley, whereat the Indians at once drew off. The fugitive, keenly alive to everything that was happening, now turned and ran up the canyon. There was more excitement among the Indians far beyond, at the bend of the big rift. Their numbers appeared to be increasing, but they did not venture on any advance just then. In a short time the fugitive joined the soldiers.

"I knew it," cried McNeil, reaching down over the saddle and claspings the new-comer's hand. "'Tis ould Marnette. Begorry, I'm glad to see you."

"Well, sergeant," said the old scout, "I can well believe that, for I reckon you're goin' to need every man you can git a hold of afore you gits out of this yere trouble."

The sergeant nodded. There was no disputing the truth of that assertion.

"Phwhat's that bunch beyant there?" he asked briefly.

"Sioux and Cheyennes."

"Whose band?"

"Dull Knife's, I reckon."

"How did you happen to run into them?"

"I didn't; they ran into me," said old Marnette, smiling grimly.

"I see," said the sergeant.

"I was over at Fort Sullivan. Jest dropped in to see how things was gittin' along. Captain Calmore hadn't nobody but me to send. You was so long a-comin' back that he got kind-a anxious, an' since I hadn't nothin' partikler on hand, I volunteered to go out an' look you up an' do what I could."

"Didn't the other throops av the regiment git back yit?" asked the old sergeant most anxiously.

"Not yet; they're expected to-day, accordin' to runners that hev come in."

"Did you hear anything about Major Compton yit?"

"He was alive when the scouts left the com-

mand, but that was about all. Is his wife back there?"

"Yes, she's there. That's why we're so slow," answered the sergeant, "an' now we've got to fight. Well, let's go back to the thrain."

"Where is it?"

"Beyant the bend, yonder."

"Have you got any likker on you, sergeant?" asked Marnette suddenly.

"No," answered McNeil tersely, "I don't dhrink nothin' at all when I'm in command, an' phwhat we have is in the kapin' of Bridget in the wagon."

"Say, Marnette, you look kind-a pale," said Jackson.

"Well, you see, I've lost a leettle blood. I've got a scratch jest yere, along my ribs, an'——"

In a second Jackson was off his horse.

"Mount," he said, "I'll help you."

"I can walk all right."

"Don't talk," said McNeil, "Jackson's young an' light av foot. We must git back to the wagons an' decide on phwhat's to be done."

It did not take them long to reach the wagon

train, the men of which, under the command of Corporal Schmidt, the junior non-com. with the detachment, were in a state of great excitement. Molly McNeil was dancing about in front of the ambulance talking eagerly to young Danny Meagher, who was only a boy of eighteen himself, and Bridget and Mrs. Compton were both peering anxiously out from under the canvas cover, Mrs. Compton, as usual, supported by the other woman.

In a last glance as he rode up, McNeil could see at least five hundred Sioux and Cheyennes in the mouth of the canyon back of him with a big pony herd.

"Marnette!" cried Mrs. Compton as the old plainsman edged Jackson's horse around by the side of the ambulance, "you have come from the post?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered Marnette, who was an old and valued friend of her husband and herself. "The troops ain't in yet," continued the scout, "but we had a message from 'em. They'd ought to git to Fort Sullivan to-day."

"And my husband?"

"He was still alive when the message came

in, an' he sent word that he was feelin' pretty cheerful."

"Thank God!" said the woman. "Let us hasten on, sergeant."

"I'm thinkin' we'll have to shtay a bit where we are, ma'am," answered McNeil in his rich brogue. "You see, there's only wan way to git to Fort Sullivan, an' the Sioux are down the canyon in foorce under old Dull Knife, who's sharper than his name. But don't fear, we'll hold 'em off an' manage to git word to the post somehow, an' it'll mean jist a little delay. Eh, men?"

The soldiers broke into cheers.

"Seddon," continued McNeil, smiling with grim pleasure at the spirit of the men, "ride for'ard to the bend av the pass an' kape an eye on them Injuns. Lemme know if they make any move to come up the canyon. Meanwhile, Mrs. Compton, if you'll let Bridget here, who's as good as a dochter, look at Marnette——"

"Have you been wounded?" exclaimed Marion Compton.

"Jest a scratch in the side, ma'am," said Marnette. "They got my broncho, but they

paid for him, an' they nearly got me, too."

"Bridget, do what you can quickly," said Mrs. Compton immediately.

There was a medicine chest in the ambulance. Bridget got it out and busied herself with Marnette, who submitted with much reluctance and blushing protest to the baring of his side.

"I ain't used to this," he protested. "I jest washes 'em out an' gives 'em a lick of axle grease an' lets 'em go when I git hit, gener'ly."

"Now," said Bridget, "be quiet. I'm goin' to hurt you. 'Tis a nashty score an' 'tis an ugly wound an' you've lost much blood. Here, dhrink this."

"Me—eh?" said Marnette as he drained the cup. "I'd be willin' to be shot in the other side for another taste of that."

"It's no more you'll git," said Bridget. "We may be after nadin' all we got fer others that won't git off so aisy."

While this little colloquy had gone on, McNeil, Jackson, and Schmidt had engaged in a rapid discussion.

"We can't go for'ard," said McNeil.

"We can't stay here, either," said Jackson. "If they should get over on that other side of the canyon they could pick us off one by one, it's so narrow here."

"You remember dot place ve shtopped for dinner to-day—dot high shelf near de brook ver de canyon videns out und dere iss a broad field on de odder side?" asked the junior corporal.

"Perfectly, Dutch," said the sergeant.

"I advise dot ve go back dere und make our shtand."

"Strikes me your advice is pretty good, Schmidt," said McNeil.

"I haff seen some fighting in de old country," said the German phlegmatically; "so long as ve haff ammunition und somedings to eat und drink we hold dem off dere."

"I believe you, my boy," said McNeil. "There's plenty av ammunition in the wagons, an' food, too, but it's the dhrink."

"Vell, dere ain't no shprings in dese valls. Ve got to git it out of de creek verever ve are."

"Phwhat do you think about it, Jackson?"

"I think Dutch is right."

"Oh, Marnette," cried McNeil to the scout, observing that Bridget had finished her task.

"Well?"

"Do you remember that place about five miles back up the canyon, where the Big Meadows are, an' the place broadens out to about a mile wide?"

"Do you mean where that trail runs into a rocky shelf over the brook on the north side?" asked the scout.

"I do. Phwhat do you think of it as a place for a camp? Can we hould it?"

"Sure," answered the old frontiersman confidently. "It's about the best place in the canyon. We can keep 'em back at the bend yonder for a while, but the canyon here is so narrer that they'd git over on the other side an' that'd be the end of us. Up at the Big Meadows there's no way to git us except by chargin' right at us, an' I guess we can hold 'em off there."

"How are you feelin'?"

"Kind-a stiff."

"He's lost about a quart of blood. Look at him," said Bridget. "His side's wet clear down to his boots."

"I'm good for a lot of Sioux and Cheyennes, nevertheless," said Marnette, smiling.

"Oh, father, can I shoot a gun if there's a battle?" cried Molly.

"You little shpalpeen," said McNeil, smiling at her.

"She's a chip av the old block, McNeil," interrupted his wife quickly, "an' if the worrst comes to the worrst she can handle a carbine, as I can meself, wid any of 'em."

"Danny said I could shoot his gun some time."

"If Trooper Meagher lets any female child, or male one ayther for that matter, git hould av his carbine, I'll have him before a court. Do ye hear that, Danny?"

"I hear it, sor."

"Well, it goes."

"Men, what have you decided?" asked Mrs. Compton, who had been an interested listener.

"Ma'am, we'll have to go back up the canyon to the place we have agreed upon, where we can hould them off, an' then we'll thry to git word to Captain Calmore or whoever is at the post to come an' fetch us in," answered the sergeant defferentially.

Marion Compton was experienced enough and intelligent enough to understand the situation, but her heart sank for many reasons, yet there was nothing else to be done. She had an impulse to urge the sergeant to press on to the post and try to cut a way through the Indians, but she knew that her urging would be in vain, and that it ought to be in vain. McNeil was responsible for the safety of the party, and he was man enough to assume his responsibility, soldier enough to discharge it unflinchingly, and not even her appeals could move him from what he decided was the proper course and of which her own intelligence now approved.

“It won’t be long, ma’am,” said Bridget consolingly.

“Of course not,” said the sergeant, taking his cue from his wife. “We’ll send out a messenger to-night, an’ by day afther to-morrow it’ll be all over.”

Day after to-morrow! Her heart fell. Could she wait that long? Mrs. Compton looked piteously at Bridget, who was standing by the ambulance. The latter put out her hand and patted her mistress gently.

“Thrust in God an’ the saints, an’ me, ma’am,” she whispered, knowing full well what was in the poor lady’s mind. “I’ll see you through, wid the help av them others.”

“Sergeant,” came the voice of Seddon sharply as he turned his head around. “They’re moving up the canyon.”

“Corporal Schmidt,” said McNeil instantly, “take four files an’ go to the bend av the canyon, join Seddon, take command av the squad, put your harses back av the bend here, an’ take cover, hould the Indians in check for an hour or until four o’clock—” he peered at his old silver watch a moment—“by that time we’ll be back in the meadows. Do you understand?”

“I understant,” said Schmidt, saluting in acknowledgment of the formal order. “Can I haff any man I vant?”

“Certainly, take your pick.”

“Take me, take me,” shouted one man after another to Schmidt, who waved them back.

He selected two Germans, an Irishman, and an American—a veteran of the Civil War.

“Any more orders?”

“None. Be off wid you,” said McNeil.

So Schmidt and the little squadron trotted down the canyon toward the bend. Fortunately the place on the trail where they had halted was wide enough to turn the wagons. Everybody worked with speed, but quietly and without confusion. Sending Jackson ahead with half the men and following himself with the other half, McNeil started his command up the canyon again. There was no time for care, and they went ahead as fast as they could. As they pressed on they heard the crackling of the carbines of Schmidt's detachment, which gave evidence that they were engaged and holding their own.

III

HOW THEY PREPARED TO DEFEND THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN

THE place they had chosen was admirably adapted for defence. The trail ran into a broad shelf, which had been hollowed out of the mountain wall by some prehistoric torrent. The rocky wall, which was concave, was deeply recessed so they would be, in a measure, protected from an enfilading fire when within its depths. If they could get to it, the shallow brook rapidly descending the canyon, whirling and brawling over its stony bed, would furnish them with an abundance of water. Beyond the main stream of the brook lay a broad stretch of grass-covered level ground, perhaps a mile in width and two miles or more in length. It was well watered, and on the farther side groves of small pines grew thickly. The opposite wall of the canyon rose gently. This fertile and lovely meadow had been the site of a flourishing ranch be-

fore the Indian troubles. The ranch owner had left it, the buildings had been burned in some foray.

The rock-strewn shelf rose with the trail for twenty feet or more above the brook and meadow. Its extent was limited, of course. There was no place for the horses of the troopers and the mules that drew the wagons and the ambulance. It went awfully against the grain, but they had to be abandoned to the Indians. They were unhitched and unsaddled and driven down across the brook into the meadow. Tears stood in the eyes of some of these hard-bitten rough riders as they parted from their horses, but there was absolutely no help for it.

Working frantically, they dismounted the wagons and arranged the beds around the outer edge of the shelf to make a sort of rude entrenchment, piling the running gear on top or in the interspaces as a protection against a possible attempt to rush the barricade. The supplies they carried on their persons were almost exhausted, but under the circumstances McNeil broke open a wagon loaded with food and supplies without hesitation in order to assure to each man food, an extra rifle, and all

the ammunition necessary. And he delighted Molly's heart by routing out for her a light Remington, the private property of one of the officers, and a small revolver.

"Jist put a rifle an' a revolver handy for me an' the missis," said old Bridget. "I don't expect to join in the fightin', but it may come in handy. For you know I've got more things to do than any av ye, for I'll look afther the wounded. I've got to tend to Mrs. Compton, too, an' I'm thinkin' that this detachment will be larger than it is now before very long if we don't git out in a hurry," she said sagely to her husband.

"To git out in a hurry is impossible," said the sergeant. "We may never git out at all, at all, an' if we don't"—he suddenly turned to his wife and kissed her before them all—"you've been a good wife to a poor soldier."

"An' it's a proud woman I am to have ye say those worrds, Tim McNeil," said Bridget, her weather-beaten face flushing as the men, who had seen everything, laughed and cheered.

"All av us will have to do the best we can," said the sergeant. "We've dismounted the ambulance an' we've made Mrs. Compton as

comfortable an' as private as we can beneath the canvas top, though 'tis a good targit against the dark wall."

"I want to see Sergeant McNeil," said Mrs. Compton from the covered ambulance body, which had been placed like a tent in the safest corner of the nook nearest the wall. Rocks had been piled about it to protect it from chance shots.

"Here I am, ma'am," said the big soldier, presenting himself at the entrance.

"Sergeant," said Mrs. Compton, extending her hand, "whatever happens I want you to know how much I appreciate you. I think you have all been true and devoted soldiers and comrades, and I want you to tell the others, too. I do not know whether I will come out of this alive, but whether I do or not I want you to understand how grateful I am and——"

"Nobody an' nothin' will ever harrm you as long as there's a man in the troop livin', ma'am."

"I know that," said the woman, "but I am very weak and ill——"

She looked up at him with a tear-stained, anxious face. McNeil stared down at her

awkwardly but compassionately. He understood. He bent over the hand she reached up to him as she half reclined in the wagon and kissed it like a knight of old.

"Why, we'd all die for you an' the major," he said impulsively in profound pity.

"I know," said the woman, smiling faintly as he withdrew and got to work again.

With soldierly precaution the sergeant now directed that every receptacle that could hold a drop of water must be filled. There might come a time when it would be impossible to get it, and water would be as precious as though each drop were a diamond.

"Well, I guess we've done about everything we can," he said to Corporal Jackson at last, looking around his little band and raising his voice so that all could hear. "We've got to protect Mrs. Compton—to say nothin' av Molly an' Bridget—to the very last. I know I can depend on all you men. I ain't good at spache-makin', men, but when they come up we'll all give 'em fits. Eh, bullies?"

"You bet your sweet life we will," roared Jackson as the detachment broke into three cheers.

"We can hold this place for some time," continued the sergeant, "but somebody's got to carry word to Fort Sullivan. Who'll volunteer?"

"I reckon that'll be my job," said Marnette promptly.

"'Tis you that can't do it," said the sergeant decisively. "You're wounded already. Your wound'll hurt worse to-night than it does to-day. 'Tis got to be a well man that thries that dangerous job."

"I reckon that's so," admitted the old plainsman reluctantly.

"Who'll volunteer, laads?"

Every man in the half platoon jumped forward, clamorous.

"Lemme go, sergeant," said young Danny Meagher. "I'm the lightest an' fleetest av foot. I can outrun any man in the regiment, an' although I'm the youngest, I know the country like a book. I'm smaller than the rest of 'em, too, an' 'tis aisy it'll be to hide meself. I can climb the rocks quicker an' I don't believe there's a man who can shoot straighter or ride fashter or who'll thry harder, if I do say it meself."

“Phwhat do you think av the bhoy, Jackson?” asked McNeil.

“I’m in favor of lettin’ the kid try it. As he says, he’s quicker than any of us. Take most of us off our horses and we’re no good at all. We ain’t cut out for dough-boys or beetle-crushers. He can shoot. He knows the country. He’s got the nerve, too,” said the corporal decisively.

“Oh, let Danny go, father,” cried Molly, jumping up and down in her excitement, for she was having the time of her sweet young life.

“And has it come to this that a vet’ran sarrgeant av harse in the sarvice of the United States has got to take counsel wid a shlip av a girl?”

“Out av the mouths of babes an’ sucklin’s, the good Book says,” interposed Bridget smilingly.

“An’ av women, too, God save us,” laughed McNeil.

“Well, many a man would be better off if he took the advice av his wife,” retorted Bridget. “You bachelors in the throop don’t know that yit.”

"But 'tis true, jist the same," said McNeil.
"Well, Danny, you can go. 'Tis a heavy responsibility to put on a laad, but somehow I kind-a think you'll manage it."

"I will that, sor, or be a dead man."

"And if you're a dead man, don't you never come back to tell us you've failed," said the sergeant gravely.

"I will not."

"I'm not sendin' you out to git killed at all, but to git through."

"Have you any orders, sor?"

"Only to git there an' tell Captain Calmore, or whoever is commandin' the post, where we are, an' that they'd better hurry."

"An', Danny," said Bridget, "a worrd in your ear. Tell them to send a dochter wid the rescue party, an' tell him to come quick, for the love av hiven."

"I will that, ma'am."

"Now God bless you, for a brave broth av a bhoy," said the good-hearted Irishwoman, bending over and giving him a hearty kiss, with which Danny blushed fiercely and the men laughed gaily. "Perhaps," continued the undaunted Bridget, "Mrs. Compton will

be afther sendin' a message. Come over here an' we'll see."

"You are going to try to get to Fort Sullivan, Danny?" asked Mrs. Compton.

"No, ma'am, I ain't goin' to thry it, I'm goin' to do it."

"When do you start?" she asked, smiling at his bold answer.

"Jist as soon as it gits dark enough to hide me, ma'am."

"Tell my husband to keep up his spirits and not to give way. That I will soon be with him, and that I'm all right—yet," added Mrs. Compton softly.

"Mother, may I kiss him, too?" asked Molly as Danny came away from the ambulance.

"'Twould be ondacent," said Mrs. McNeil, laughing in spite of herself.

But Meagher, taking the initiative and responsibility, lifted Molly, who was only a little girl in spite of her fourteen years, high up in the air and kissed her bravely on the cheek before he set her down.

"Well, now," said Sergeant McNeil, "afther all this affectin' an' tender partin', which as a husband an' a father I might ob-

ject to—only I won't—perhaps you'd better make your preparations. Have you any plan?"

"None, except to climb the wall as soon as it's dark enough, an' then God help me."

"Take plenty of ammunition," said the sergeant.

"Best take my advice," said Marnette, "an' don't travel too heavy. It's not so much fightin' as strategy that's goin' to git you through."

"That's a good worrd from long expayrience," assented McNeil.

"I suggest that you strike across country until you git to Black Creek an' then foller that down until you reach the Big Buffalo Wallers. You know that place?" continued Marnette.

"I know. 'Tis jist beyond the big spring."

"Exactly. You'll find plenty of cover till you git there. After that—well, if the Lord don't cover you I don't know what will. Don't you risk nothin' by takin' a shot at no redskins, neither. We're all pullin' hard for you."

"Here comes Schmidt an' his detachment,"

said one of the men suddenly as five men came galloping up the trail ahead of the corporal, who insisted on bringing up the rear of his small command.

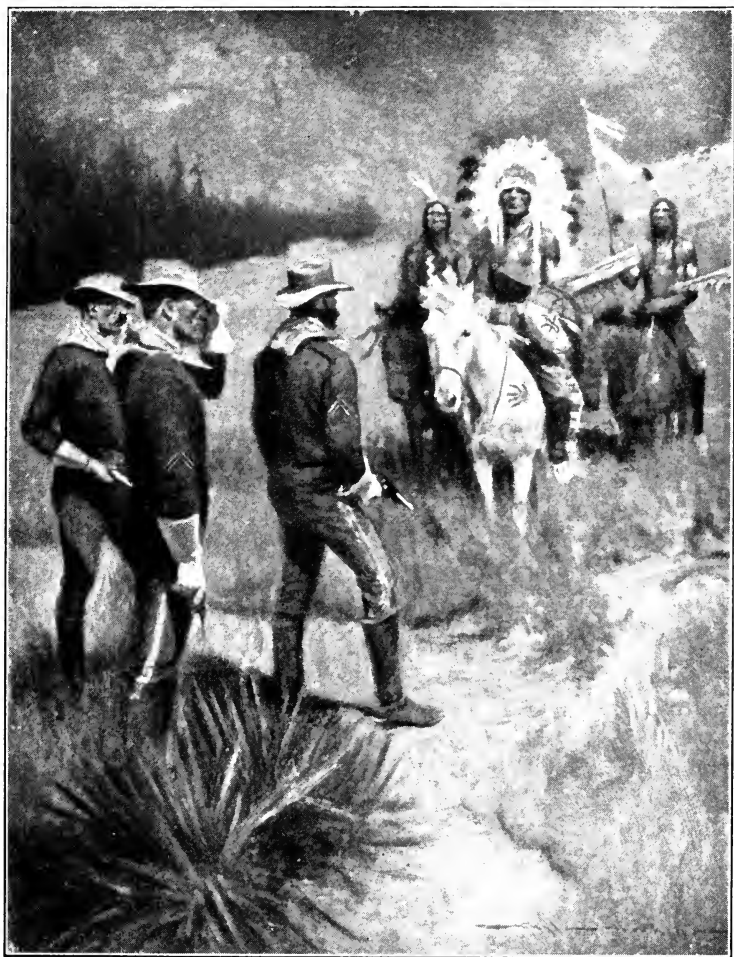
"'They're comin'," said Seddon, in the lead, as he reined in his horse outside the improvised entrenchment. "'There ain't so many comin' as there was, though,'" he added, laughing.

"'I haff de honor to report dot I haff brought back my detachment intact, und ve haff accounted for several of de enemy,'" said Schmidt, saluting gravely with his usual punctilious care in his old-world way.

The sergeant smiled grimly as he acknowledged the courtesy of the slow-going but hard-fighting subordinate.

"'Have your men turn their harses loose, corp'ral, and then come in here. What do you think of these preparations?'"

"'It iss fine. Ve can hold diss place for vun long time midout no doubt, und ve vill haff to do it, for if dere is vun Injun dere iss five hundred, und dey haff dere womans und dere children und dere herds along mit 'em,'" was the deliberate but not unexpected answer.



"'VE TOLD 'EM TO GO VERE DEY WAS GOING"

“You had plenty of time to count them?” asked McNeil.

“Ve had speech mit ’em.”

“What?”

“Dey sent out a vite flag und ve met de chief. He said if ve give up de vagons und our guns he let us pass.”

“And what did you say, Schmidt?” asked McNeil.

“Ve told ’em to go vere dey vas going,” said the corporal, turning away amid a great outburst of laughter from the men.

“Good!” said McNeil. “When they get nearer we’ll help them on their journey.”

IV

WHICH SETS FORTH THE REPULSE OF THE FIRST SAVAGE ATTACK

ALL these operations had taken considerable time. It was late in the afternoon, the sun was low on the horizon behind the mountains, and it was already dusk in the meadow when the first Indian appeared on the trail down the canyon. Like the mountain brook, which had cut its way through the hills, the canyon was as crooked as a ram's horn, and so narrow that an active man could throw a stone from wall to wall through most of its length. The pocket in which they were encamped, however, was almost big enough to be known in the wild West as a "hole." It was at least a mile wide and the entrance where the Indian appeared was just barely within range of a good rifle, though a trifle far for a trooper's carbine. Of course, the camp was in plain sight and the Indian scout, thinking himself entirely safe, surveyed it keenly.

“I don’t like the looks av him,” said the sergeant to Corporal Jackson. “You’ve got a marksman’s badge, give him a shot—not from your carbine, but from that Winchester by your hand.”

The corporal, nothing loath, knelt down, rested the new and improved gun, which had been shipped to one of the officers, on a convenient boulder, took long and careful aim, and pressed the trigger. The Indian and his horse, who had been standing like bronze statues, went down with a crash. So sudden and startling was the catastrophe that the horse fell over the trail, pitching the Indian out into the water of the brook, which there happened to be both broad and deep. He went in with a mighty splash.

“You got ’em both!” cried one as the men broke into cheers.

But this announcement was a trifle premature. The Indian’s pony had evidently received the corporal’s bullet, for he lay in a huddled heap at the side of the brook below the trail. The Indian himself, very much bedraggled, and as they could guess furiously angry, swam out of the pool, shook his fist

threateningly at them, and skipped around the bend just in time to escape another shot, which Jackson sent after him.

“I guess that’ll kape ’em off the trail, all right,” said McNeil grimly. “ ’Twas a long shot, Jackson. You did well.”

“Shust dake a look over dere,” said Corporal Schmidt, suddenly pointing across the canyon.

Outlined against the sky on the opposite canyon wall suddenly appeared a number of feathered heads. Instantly they came in view they fired at the camp. McNeil laughed.

“They’re wastin’ powdher an’ shot there,” he said.

“Und dey vill be over our heads on diss side,” continued Corporal Schmidt. “See.”

The next minute a rain of rocks came plunging down the face of the cliff, but on account of the overhang every one fell clear of the entrenched camp and splashed into the waters of the brook, which here ran close by, some twenty feet below the shelf, or buried itself harmlessly in the meadows.

“That’s jest to let us know they’re there,” said Marnette.

“It would be better if dey had not done dot, den ve would not know,” said Schmidt.

“Your experience has been in European wars, Schmidt, but I want to tell you, after havin’ fought the Injuns for twenty years, there ain’t many tricks in the game they don’t know. They fight in their own way, but they don’t lose no chances,” continued the old scout.

“An’ it’s a pretty good way, too,” said Jackson, “an’ those are the pick of all the Injuns in the United States. An’ that there Dull Knife’s most as good a gener’l as old Crazy Horse or Red Cloud hisself. The Gov’ment has been fightin’ ’em ever since the Civil War, an’ we ain’t got ’em yet.”

“I’m thinkin’ we’ll git a few afore we git out av here,” said McNeil.

“And we will have plenty to choose from,” dryly remarked Marnette. “Look yonder in the meadow.”

Taught by the narrow escape of their scout, the Indians had descended from the trail on the farther side of the bend. They had crossed the brook and were now filing into the meadow near the bluff on the opposite side.

They came in countless numbers apparently; first the warriors, then the women and children, then the herds. It was not a war party. It looked more like a migration. The season was late. It was evidently Dull Knife's big band moving off to find safe winter quarters where they could be sheltered from the cold and snow and hidden from the soldiers, who, to tell the truth, did not often resort to winter campaigns. There were numberless fastnesses in the unexplored mountains, which would be well suited to the purposes of the savages.

They had evidently blundered on this party of McNeil's, yet now that they had fallen in with them, temptation to dispatch them was irresistible. Their determination became fixed when little Molly McNeil unthinkingly jumped up on a wagon to get a better view. The Indians caught sight of her skirts fluttering in the breeze before her father, who sprang toward her, could drag her down. There was a woman and probably more women in that camp! That settled it. They would take them at whatever cost.

McNeil was furiously angry. He shook

Molly violently. He realized instantly what the discovery of her presence would mean. It would make his task that much harder.

“You disobajent child,” he cried, raising his hand, “didn’t I tell you to kape back an out av sight, an’ now——”

“Be aisy wid the darlint, you know she’s only a child, an’——”

“To those Injuns out yonder she’s a woman. They’ll never lave us now.”

“They wouldn’t have left us, anyway,” said Bridget, deftly extricating the frightened Molly from her father’s clutch, “an’ they would soon find out we was here.”

The diversion fortunately saved Molly from further punishment from her father. Rapidly spreading over the meadow, the Indians now opened fire. McNeil stepped closer to the barricade, as the men were already fingering their rifled carbines.

“Kape fasht,” he said, “till I give the ordher. If we don’t answer they’ll come nearer, an’ the more shots we can git home the healthier will be their reshpect for us. Steady, bhoys, steady.”

Back by the ambulance Molly was getting

hers, for indignant Mrs. McNeil boxed her ears soundly.

"The idea of vexin' your father, wid all his cares an' responsibilities. If 'twas more private I'd lay you over me knee." She set her down violently. "Shtay there an' don't you move till I give you lave."

Poor Molly, whimpering and very much frightened, instantly obeyed. Meanwhile it worked out just as the experienced sergeant had foreseen. The Indians raced rapidly in giddy circles past the shelf, generally throwing themselves behind the horses and firing as they passed. The bullets splintered against the rock overhead or buried themselves in the wagon beds. But one struck a trooper in the arm.

"Are you badly hurrt, man?" asked McNeil anxiously as he saw the soldier stagger.

"In the arm."

"Is it broke?"

"No, sir."

"Go back to the women an' git it dressed an' come back here," said McNeil briefly.

"Bridget."

"Phwhat is it?"

“Here’s work for you, an’ Molly, too.”

The Indians were coming nearer and nearer with every revolution they made.

“We might give ’em a shot or two now, sergeant,” said Jackson.

“It iss better to wait a little more, I dinks,” said the deliberate and cautious Schmidt.

“Every time they pass they git nearer,” said McNeil. “We’ll have plenty of chances prisently an’——”

“Here they come again,” said Jackson as the streaming horde drew abreast of the little entrenchment.

McNeil bent forward, took a critical look, measured the distance, straightened up, lifted his rifle.

“Give it to ’em, men. Not too fast. Shteady.”

The wagon-box fort was rimmed with smoke which was punctured with fire. The rifles of the defenders spoke almost in unison. Waiting for the cloud of smoke to blow away before they fired again, they saw as it lifted a dozen Indian ponies down and half as many Indians. One of them suddenly sprang to his feet. Three rifles cracked simultaneously and the

unfortunate Indian went down again, this time for good.

“We’ve got plenty of ammunition an’ we’d better make sure. Give each wan av ’em lyin’ there another bullet,” ordered the sergeant.

It was grim work and ruthless, but perhaps more merciful in the end, for it would be almost impossible for any wounded man to have got away. He would have to lie there and suffer or die, covered as he was by the guns of the soldiers. Of course, the loss that had been inflicted upon the Indians was trifling, comparatively speaking, but it was very healthy for the defenders in its moral effect nevertheless. The circus riding ceased at once. The Indians drew off to safe distance and began to debate on what was to be done.

Evidently they decided that since night was at hand, their first business would be to make camp. One arm of the brook which divided at the upper end of the meadow skirted the cliff on the opposite side. There was a fine stretch of woodland at the base of the other wall. The Indians retired thither and pitched their tepees. It was now so dark that the soldiers could not make out what was being done, but

the presence of numberless little fires told them that the Indians were preparing to make a night of it.

The defenders were in reasonably good spirits. Between Marnette's encounter and the smart action of Schmidt's squad on the trail and the good shooting of the defenders of the enclosure, they had accounted for nearly a score of Indians with only two unimportant casualties. Marnette declared that he was all right, or would be, and the trooper whose wound in the left arm Bridget and Molly had dressed was already back at his place in the fighting line.

The most serious accident that had happened to them had been the piercing of their water cask by a stray bullet. As this cask contained the larger part of the water supply, the troopers had drunk freely of their canteens during the heat of the fray, and they were somewhat dismayed when they found that all the water had run out of the cask except a modicum at the bottom below the hole made by the bullet. There was, however, in some buckets a supply enough for the next day, if it were carefully husbanded. Of course, the

brook ran close by some twenty feet below the level of the shelf. A little stretch of broken rock intervened between the foot of the cliff and the bank of the stream so that they could not draw water up by dropping buckets over on the ends of ropes, although they tried it.

McNeil decided to make no attempt to send any one down to get water that night. The remaining buckets with their precious contents were carefully concealed behind boulders and whatever was left in the individual canteens was added to the general store. Bridget took upon herself the task of serving it out a cupful at a time at such intervals as her husband directed.

“Now, Danny,” said the sergeant as soon as it had become quite dark, “I guess you’d better be makin’ a shtart. We know that there’s a detachment av these Indians on the bluffs over our heads. We know, too, that you can’t git up the cliff here, but up the trail about half a mile the wall is broke. Did you notice it when we passed this mornin’?”

“I did, sor.”

“It’s there you had better thry it. For the love av hiven go cautious an’ don’t make any

mistakes, an' if you get killed may you never live to tell it."

"I won't, sor."

"Anybody can git himself killed. That's aisy. 'Tis the brave man that gits through," continued the old sergeant. "Think of the women that's here. It don't make so much difference about the men. It's all in the day's work, we've got to take phwhat's comin' to us, but there's little Molly an' good old Bridget an' the major's lady." The sergeant stopped, turned away, and shook his head. "Well, no more av that. Go, my bhoy, an' God an' the saints bless you."

Danny had taken off his uniform and had put on a brown leather hunting suit that he had taken from a package sent to Lieutenant Hadden, who was about his size, and which he had been specially commissioned to look after. He had discarded his boots and put on a pair of stout Indian moccasins. He shook hands with the sergeant and turned away. As he passed the ambulance he paused. Bridget and Molly were standing there.

"Has Mrs. Compton anythin' else to say?" he asked.

“She’s slapin’ now, poor darlint,” answered Bridget. “Go, an’ may hiven protect you.”

Bestowing a furtive pat on Molly’s curly head, Meagher climbed noiselessly over the barricade, and set his moccasined feet on the trail. He pressed close to the rock and slowly made his way up the canyon, feeling with his foot every step he took lest he might strike a loose pebble or give other notice of his progress to the keenest and most watchful sentinels in the world; for he knew, as everybody else did, that the Indian observers would probably be hidden in the grass of the meadow or behind hillocks or in ravines not a hundred feet away.

Danny had lived in the West for a long time. He had been born in Nebraska, in fact, and was an accomplished plainsman before he joined the Army. He had been helped a great deal by old Marnette’s advice in a short talk he had enjoyed in the intervals of fighting, yet in spite of a cool head it was with a beating heart that he crept along.

V

SHOWS THE MERCY IN THE BULLET OF A FRIEND

BACK in the camp, McNeil was taking counsel with his subordinates.

“If anybody could git through, that bhoy’ll do it,” he said.

“But it may be beyond human power. P’r’aps we’d better send another messenger the other way,” observed Jackson.

“I dink it vould be vell,” assented Schmidt.

“What do you think about it, Marnette?”

“Of course,” said the old scout after considering the subject carefully, “there’s more than a chance that the youngster won’t git through. If he don’t, an’ unless the people at the post becomes alarmed becuz we don’t come in, an’ send out to hunt for us of their own accord, an’ send a party strong enough to rescue us, I guess we’ll never leave this rock. On the whole, I’m inclined to agree with our German friend yere.”

"But if we send another man, shall we send him afther Danny?"

"No, he'd better go down the canyon."

"But the Injuns came from that way."

"Yes, that may make his chance harder or it may make it easier. Nachur'ly the Injuns might think nobody'd be fool enough to go down where they came up, an' there you are."

"I see."

"Well, we'll have to call for another volunteer," continued the scout.

"I'll go," said Jackson and Schmidt simultaneously.

The Irish brogue and the broken English blended strangely, but McNeil shook his head.

"If anything should happen to me, you two men would be needed. Marnette can't go, nayther."

"Blast that Injun that got me," said Marnette disgustedly. "Without meanin' any reflection on you soldiers, I'm the one man who could have done it."

"But it is out of the question. We can't send a wounded man on an errand like that. Who is the best man to do it, now that Meagher has gone?"

“There’s Seddon,” suggested Jackson.

“He iss a goot man,” assented Schmidt.

“We can’t make any commotion by askin’ for volunteers. Schmidt, bring Seddon over here.”

The conversation had been carried on in low tones. There would be keen ears perhaps within hearing distance. There were plenty of Indians who understood English sufficiently well to make out what was being planned if they could hear.

Most of the troopers had rolled themselves up in their blankets, pillowed their heads on their saddles, and had gone to sleep by McNeil’s direction. He wanted them to be as fit as possible and there was no necessity for the whole command to keep awake. Sentinels had been placed and they were attentive to their duties. Schmidt found Seddon without difficulty and a touch on his shoulder awakened him.

“De sergeant wants you,” he whispered, “und don’t make any noise.”

Seddon was on the alert on the instant. He rose, walked over to the little group, and saluted.

“Seddon,” said McNeil, “we have decided to send out another messenger, this time to go down the canyon. It would make too much commotion to wake the men an’ ask one av ’em to volunteer. We think you’re the best man for the job. ’Tis a juty I won’t ordher any man to undertake.”

“I’ll be glad of the chance, sergeant,” said Seddon eagerly. “I was terribly disappointed when you chose Meagher.”

“Good,” said McNeil. “I knew we were not mistaken, an’ as it happens, you’ve got the most dangerous task, the post of honor afther all.”

“Have you any orders?”

“None, except to go down the canyon an’—you heard phwhat I said to Meagher. You know that if we’re not rescued we’ll be picked off wan by wan, an’ in the end——”

“I understand,” said Seddon.

“I wish you could git a huntin’ suit like——”

“We can fix part of that,” said Marnette. “You take my leather shirt an’ gimme your jacket. Mrs. McNeil’s got another pair of moccasins, she told me——”

"You can have 'em," chimed in McNeil.

"That will do fine," said Seddon, rapidly divesting himself of his coat, which he handed to Marnette. "Here's hoping that either Meagher or I or both of us get through," he said cheerfully, as he slipped on the moccasins which McNeil fetched for him. "If I don't, you will see that somebody writes to my mother, sergeant? Captain Calmore has her address in the company files."

"I will that," answered McNeil solemnly, "but, please God, nothin' may happen. Is there anything we can do for you?"

"Nothing," said Seddon.

"May God guard you, old man," said Jackson earnestly, for he and Seddon were very warm friends and comrades of long standing—"bunkies," in fact.

"You haff de hardest task und de most honorable," said Schmidt.

The four men shook hands with him and Seddon turned away, clambered noiselessly over the barricade, and went down the trail as Meagher had gone up.

"I'll set up till twelve o'clock," said McNeil. "You two men can turn in if you want

to. At twelve I'll wake Jackson an' at four Schmidt'll relieve him."

"I don't feel like sleeping now," said Jackson.

"Nor me needer," said Schmidt.

"How long do you think we can hold this place, Jackson?"

"Jest as long as there are enough of us left alive to keep off them Injuns. We've got ammunition an' grit enough an' I guess we can git water somehow."

"But they got one av us to-day. If that bullet had gone a few inches to the right, the man would have been killed. You know them Injuns. They'll swarm about us an' pour a perfect rain of lead in here an' some av us are bound to git picked off. Unless ye can inflict a heavy loss on them they'll kape it up until we go wan by wan. An' they might git us all in a day or two days, three at the outside, I should think."

"Vell," said Schmidt, "all ve got to do iss to keep at dem shust as long as dere iss any of us."

"You're right there, Dutch, an'——"

"Hark! What's that?"

The three men sprang to their feet and ran to the barricade. Beyond the lower end where the trail led down the canyon there was a sudden rattle of shots. Flashes of light penetrated the darkness and in the silence of the night the reports sounded loud and fearfully near.

“Dey got him,” said Schmidt in an awe-struck whisper.

“I’m afraid so,” said McNeil.

“Poor Seddon!” at last said Jackson, turning away to hide his face. “Well, he died like a brave man.”

The next minute the whole meadow was alive. It was quite evident what had happened. The Indians had guarded the lower end of the trail and Seddon had blundered into them. They could picture him fighting for his life. That he did so that rattle of shots had proved. The Indians had awakened all over the meadow. They fired on the camp. The men, now all wide awake, lay quiet behind the wagons by McNeil’s orders until the firing gradually died away. There were no casualties, and the remainder of the night passed without other interruption or mischance of

any kind. Indeed, the men all got some sleep to fit them for the hard day to come.

At dawn they found that some of the Indians had been busy. In front of the soldiers in the meadow a huge stake cut from a tree on the other side had been driven into the ground during the night. It was just out of range from the shelf. The morning sun discovered the naked body of Seddon bound to it. He had been frightfully wounded, his body was covered with blood, and from the way he hung in the lashings it was seen that he was in a terrible state. One arm hung absolutely limp. The other was left free. He had been scalped, too, but he was alive!

Such anguish and rage filled the hearts of these men that McNeil had to knock two of them down with the butt of his gun to keep them in the barricade. Not that he felt less than the others; on the contrary, since it was he who had sent Seddon out to this awful death. But he realized that the Indians had put him there to draw the men from the camp so that they could be overwhelmed in the open—tempting them to a sortie which would result in their instant destruction. Seddon would

have to stand the torture, and the men would have to witness the sacrifice. It was horrible.

The Indians evidently believed that the appeal to the soldiers could not be made too strongly or too quickly. They brought bundles of dry wood and piled them around the stake at which they had tortured their wretched captive during the night. One of them next approached with a torch, which he plunged into the dry wood. Seddon was still alive. He lifted his free hand and brought it suddenly up to his heart. His meaning was unmistakable.

“I’m the best shot of the bunch,” said Marnette suddenly as the flames began to crackle through the fagots, “an’ I reckon it’s up to me to put him out of his mis’ry an’ balk them red devils.”

“Lest anybody should think I am shirking my duty, I want to say in the presence av all av the men that I approve av phwhat you would do,” said McNeil, grim and grave of face and voice.

“But it’s too long a shot from here,” said Jackson hoarsely—Seddon was his dearest friend; he could not bear to see him suffer.

"I don't intend to try it from yere," said Marnette, quietly looking to his rifle.

"You know they're doin' it to make us come out to rescue him?"

"Well, we'll make a bluff at that. I'll go first, an' I suggest that you send ten men to foller arter me in single file with their guns loaded, sergeant."

"Good. Wid phwhat is left we'll open fire so as to cover you an' make 'em think we are the fools they're playin' us for."

"I'll stop jest as soon as I git in safe range an' let him have one bullet an' then afore they know it we'll run back in the fort."

The ruse of the old frontiersman was quite plain. He would make the Indians think that the party was coming out to rescue Seddon, by which means they would probably retire until they thought the party had moved far enough away from the enclosure to enable them to get them before they attempted to make any attack.

"'Tis a foine plan an' I approve av it," said the sergeant grimly.

"For the love av hiven!" said Bridget, suddenly coming to the sergeant's side. She

was experienced enough to know what was toward.

"Marnette is goin' to shoot him," whispered her husband. "Take Molly back there. 'Tis no sight for a child. Don't let even a whisper of it git to Mrs. Compton's ears. How is she?"

Bridget shook her head.

"She's a sick woman this day."

"Then go to her. 'Tis no sight for a woman or a man aven. Do you all understand," he asked loudly as Bridget drew away, "that all this is done by me ordher?"

Nobody could say he shirked responsibility, and it was a fearful one to condemn a man to instant death. Yet there would be mercy in Marnette's bullet, the only mercy they could show their unfortunate comrade. McNeil looked at the old scout and knew that he would not miss. His nerves were like iron. Rapidly the sergeant directed Schmidt and then ten soldiers to follow the scout. Jackson and the others, white-faced and shaking, watched.

Wasting no more words, Marnette sprang over the barricade, dropped down the face of the cliff, crossed the brook while Schmidt and

the other men followed him closely. They made a great show of speed as they deployed and advanced across the meadow. The Indians, who had bound Seddon, made a great pretence of withdrawing, but McNeil and Jackson observed that they did not go far and that those near the camps were already mounting their ponies.

For a moment it flashed into the minds of Marnette and Schmidt, who were side by side, that perhaps by a mad dash they could rescue Seddon. McNeil, standing on top of the barricade, seemed to divine their thoughts. He shouted out to them.

“You can’t do that. For pity’s sake, git it over wid an’ git back. They’re mountin’ beyant.”

He gave an order and the barricade was covered with smoke as the volleys went through the air. And in order to give the impression that the number of the defenders was great, the soldiers fired again and again, using their spare rifles as well as their own. Meanwhile the little band advanced slowly.

“Now,” said Marnette, firmly halting at last, “it’s a long shot, but I can do it by the

help of God. The rest of you fire at the Indians as soon as I fire.”

Seddon was a hero to the last. As the men advanced he waved them back with his hand and then again pointed to his heart. The old scout took careful aim. Indeed, he could not miss. He prayed as he glanced through the sights. Then Marnette’s rifle cracked and Seddon collapsed, killed instantly. His head fell forward. His anguish was over. There was a new red spot on his white breast over his heart. The old scout’s nerve had served him well. He had not wasted a moment. Already the flames were leaping high about the post.

“Fine shooting,” said the old German in an awe-struck voice. “A good endt for a brave man. A friend’s bullet in his heart. It iss better so. Ve go back. Dey are coming on de run.”

The Indians, maddened by the trick, exasperated by Seddon’s release, hurried frantically on horseback across the prairie only to be checked by the withering fire of the defenders; yet the little expedition did not come off scot-free. One of the soldiers was shot

through the body. As Schmidt had led the advance he brought up the rear. He saw the soldier fall. He picked him up and carried him into the fort. He was not yet dead, but his lease of life was evidently not a long one. Seddon was dead, two soldiers were wounded—one mortally. Meagher was gone. The little command was reduced to sixteen unharmed soldiers, five drivers, who were as good as soldiers in defence, Marnette, and the sergeant.

“Well,” solemnly began Marnette, wiping the sweat from his brow, “I never did anything on earth I hated to do like that.”

McNeil grasped him by the hand and looked him full in his white face.

“It was well done. The whole command blesses you for it. Now men, three cheers for Marnette.”

“No,” cried the old scout, “let’s give ’em for Seddon.”

VI

WHEREIN TROOPER DANNY MEAGHER WINS THROUGH THE LINES

IT was with a beating heart that Danny Meagher crept like a shadow up the rocky trail on the side of the canyon. He hugged the canyon wall, feeling his way cautiously, straining his eyes ahead into the darkness, and carefully examining every blacker shadow that fell across the narrow trail just wide enough for the wagon train to pass.

He was lost in the darkness, yet as the night was still cloudless he could mark the top of the wall by the stars. Fortunately there was no moon and the valley, or pocket, to his left was completely dark, save for the watch fires of the Indian encampment on the further side, which he was rapidly leaving behind.

In spite of his precautions sometimes he would step on a loose pebble and the gentle rattle of the stone as it gave way under his

foot sounded in his strained ear like a volley of rifle shots.

The boy's position was one of terrible danger. The Indians filled the valley to the left of him. He knew that a detachment had been posted on the hills above him. Whether any one had been stationed on the trail ahead or not he could not tell. Good generalship would indicate that there would be a sentry or watcher up the canyon to give notice of any attempted escape that way. The Indians were not accustomed to neglect points in the game of war.

Danny had his carbine slung over his shoulder. He also had a small but heavy woodman's axe, which he carried in his hand. This with his service revolver in his belt constituted his equipment. A shot would arouse the enemy on all sides and was not to be thought of. If he met any one he must trust to the axe as a last resort. It was like a tomahawk, the silent Indian weapon.

He had got some distance from the main camp—not very far, to be sure, because of his slow and cautious progress, but quite out of sight of it, owing to the crookedness of the

canyon—when he heard clearly in the stillness of the night a sudden, rapid rattle of rifle shots. He stopped and listened. The obvious explanation was an attack on the camp, but Danny had been trained in the open and his ears were unusually keen, his judgment remarkable for so young a man, and he decided that the rifle shots came from further away than the camp.

They could only mean the interception of some one going to or from the camp—another messenger perhaps. If so, his attempt was a failure. Then came a sound of rapid firing from the meadow.

He stood listening for a moment, but it was a problem he could not solve and as his own business was pressing he started ahead, venturing to run a little in the noise and confusion. Suddenly rounding a big boulder, a little distance away he saw an Indian.

The rifle shots had aroused the attention of the redskin. He had stepped to the edge of the trail, and, resting his hand on a small, scrubby pine tree, was leaning far out looking in the direction of the barricade, which, of course, he could not see, with the valley

wrapped in darkness before him. This Indian, who had been stationed where he was to watch the trail, was so interested in what was happening in the meadow that he had neglected his principal business. He did not hear the trooper, nor did he glance in his direction.

Meagher had a second or two to make up his mind as to what course to pursue. He needed no more time. He stepped softly forward like a great cat and presently flung himself upon the Indian, praying to God that he might be alone. So eager and intent upon his prey was he that he actually forgot the axe in his hand. It fell as he sprang toward the Cheyenne. As he leaped he struck with clenched fist and the full force of his right arm. Although Danny Meagher had been born in this country, he had inherited a full measure of Irish temper from his father and mother, and it was with difficulty that he restrained himself from shouting with the sheer joy of conflict.

The Indian, as has been described, was leaning far over the trail, which had here been cut out of the side of the canyon, and there was a sheer descent of some forty feet to the brook

below. Such was the force of Danny's leap and blow that the Indian's arm was torn away from the small tree to which he held, and without having time to utter a cry, he was hurled down the sharp declivity. The impetus of the action would have carried Danny down also, and it would have been utterly impossible for him to have recovered himself at the brink of the cliff, had he not luckily brought up squarely against the stout sapling, which withstood the momentum of his smash into it and did not give away, so that by a violent effort the trooper managed to retain his footing.

The Indian had been too astonished to utter a cry. As the soldier peered over the brink of the little cliff he saw his body huddled in a heap on the rocks below. The Indian was either dead or stunned. It did not make much difference from Danny's point of view, for before he could give the alarm the soldier would be far away. Nor could he shoot him for fear of giving an immediate alarm.

Waiting a moment to see if any attention had been aroused by the encounter, he retraced his steps to the trail. Taking the axe again, Meagher, feeling sure that there was now no

one in his path, ran rapidly up the trail, noticing as he did so the gradual dying down of the firing behind him. After ten minutes he came to the place where he had decided to climb to the top.

The canyon wall had been broken by an old water course, which in the rainy season still discharged a great volume of water into the brook, at such time a roaring, rushing river. It was dry now, and for the most part its ascent presented no difficulties. There was a chance that it would be guarded at the top. The chance Meagher would have to take. He rushed up the steep and broken acclivity as if he were charging a battery, for realizing that he could not hope to ascend without making any noise, he decided that the best plan was to climb up at his best speed, regardless of how many broken rocks he disturbed or what attention he attracted.

Panting, perspiring, slipping, struggling, at last he got within a hundred feet of the top. There he stopped. There was certainly some one above him on the brink of the cliff. He heard voices, footsteps! The water course turned sharply to the right of him. After

listening he decided that if any Indians were there they would be grouped about that side.

It was now pitch dark. Clouds had appeared and were drifting across the sky, veiling even the faint light of the stars. The wind had also risen. The brink of the canyon was fringed with pines and the murmuring of swaying branches in the fresh breeze gave him a little more freedom of action. He could make some noise now without being heard. Evidently his approach had not yet been noticed.

He decided upon the risky attempt of crossing the ravine—he was then on the right side—and ascending the cliff to the left, hoping to gain the upland without being discovered. This time he proceeded more cautiously than before. He was glad that he was dressed in the dull brown leather hunting suit instead of his betraying uniform of blue and brass and yellow, and that his feet were covered with the soft moccasins in place of heavy, clumsy boots and jingling spurs, which would infallibly have betrayed him.

It was terribly difficult to climb the cliff when he left the draw, or coulée. He crept like

a monkey from rock to rock, now drawing himself up by means of cracks and crevices, now placing his weight on small trees, now clinging to flimsy undergrowth that bade fair to give way under his weight. He finally stopped just beneath the edge of the cliff.

In after years Danny Meagher often visited that very spot. He could scarcely bring himself to believe that he had made the ascent as he had that night. Indeed, had it been daylight he could never have done it. Had the emergency been less pressing he would never have attempted it in the night, even with most of its dangers unseen.

He crouched down behind a boulder just below the cliff, the edge of which he could reach by extending his hand. He was breathless, almost exhausted, the sweat stood out on his forehead. His heart was thumping madly from the extra exertion in the high altitude. In spite of himself he had made some noise. Right in the middle of the water course he had unfortunately dislodged a rock, which had gone bounding down into the canyon, a thousand feet below.

Outlined against the sky he could see dimly

a group of four Indians at the mouth of the water course off to his right that was now in front of him as he faced them and knelt behind the boulder. They were talking rapidly and gesticulating wildly. He knew a little of the Sioux dialect they were using, and he made out that their suspicions had been aroused and that they were sure somebody was there. Two of them decided to descend the water course to investigate. He saw them swing over the brink of the cliff and scramble down.

The soldier waited, hoping that the two who were left would go away, but they showed no disposition to leave. Time was precious. He decided at last he would have to get on, Indians or no Indians. His gun was still slung over his back. He stood up carefully and laid the axe on the top of the little cliff, here only about six feet high. He swung the revolver holster forward so he could seize it instantly in case of need. He could easily spring at the cliff and draw himself up, but that would make a noise. He must get to the upland some quieter way.

Keeping his eyes on the Indians and noting with great satisfaction that they had not been

disturbed yet, he climbed carefully upon the boulder, behind which he had crouched, and then reached his hand out to the upland, which was here just about as high as his middle. As he did so he felt the huge rock, which happened to be delicately balanced, tremble under his feet. In sudden alarm he sprang to the plateau. As he did so the immense boulder was dislodged and went crashing down the ravine with a roar like a thunder clap.

The two Indians who had been sitting on the edge of the cliff to the right sprang to their feet, gun in hand, and stared in the direction of the sound. One of them caught sight of Danny, apparently, for he shouted something to his companion and they both ran toward him. Meagher was discovered. There was no pretence of concealment as the second Indian followed his companion. They had their guns in one hand and hatchets or knives in the other.

It took them but a few seconds to cover the distance between them and Danny Meagher. That was time enough for him, however. He ripped out his revolver and shot the first Indian in the body, fired at the second, missed

him, but did not stop to see. He bolted across the upland directly away from the canyon at such a pace as he had never attained before. For the moment the surviving Indian did not attempt to follow. He stopped by his dead companion and when he looked up the soldier had disappeared in the darkness.

As luck would have it, Danny ran toward the Indian pony herd. There seemed to be a considerable encampment on the brink of the canyon farther down. He had no idea how many ponies there were, but it was evident that there were a number. Dogs barked. Back a mile or so, just directly over the barricade of the soldiers, in the canyon, he saw fires. There was commotion in that camp. Guns were fired wildly. Yells and cries came to him faintly.

The ponies were very restless. A lad was guarding them. He sprang up suddenly in the soldier's path. The trooper bowled him over like a tenpin. The next instant Meagher grabbed a horse and threw himself across it before the surprised boy could prevent. Digging his heels into the pony's flanks, he galloped away into the night.

His movement frightened the herd and all the ponies scattered. Meagher was without means of guiding the pony—he had been lucky even to get on one—but he was fortunately headed in the direction that took him away from the lip of the canyon, and he urged his mount mercilessly to the very limit of his power.

No one knew in what direction he had gone, and after a while he found himself riding apparently alone and not pursued. His heart throbbed with exultation. He had passed safely the most dangerous part of the journey. It would go hard, indeed, if he could not compass the rest.

VII

WHEREIN THE WATER OF LIFE IS MEASURED BY THE BLOOD OF MAN

INFURIATED by the brilliant yet terrible exploit by which they were prevented from torturing poor Seddon, on the one hand, and balked of their desire to provoke a sortie with which their overwhelming force could have dealt, on the other, the Indians kept up a close and continuous fire on the camp all day long. They took advantage of every cover afforded by the rolling surface of the meadow, the abandoned ranch buildings, boulders, and dry water courses of the rainy season, ditches or trenches cut by streams in flood, to pour a hail of bullets upon the defenders.

Most of the shots went wild—flattened harmlessly against the rocks or spent in the closely packed wagon beds. But here and there a bullet would penetrate some cranny and bury itself in a soldier. By nightfall a number

of them had been hit. Five of them were stone dead, three were desperately and two severely wounded. McNeil did not count those that, scratched or grazed, were able to continue the battle.

The Indians had paid dearly. Firing slowly and carefully, the soldiers had inflicted ten times as much damage as they had themselves sustained. At least that was in accordance with their best judgment. The meadow was dotted with dead horses and some bodies of dead warriors, which the survivors had not been able to remove.

At five o'clock a great horde of Indians, who had been galloping madly to and fro, suddenly at a given signal from old Dull Knife, who led the charge in person, faced toward the shelf and galloped directly at it under cover of the smoke of a heavy discharge. At the full speed of their ponies the wild horsemen rushed gallantly forward. Their courage was indisputable. The riflemen, sharp-shooters, or whatever they may be called, who had been firing from cover all day long, now rose to their feet, or their knees, and poured a redoubled fire across the shelf.

McNeil had divined it and his men were ready for the grand assault. The soldiers, who were provided with extra rifles and ammunition in plenty, sent back shot for shot, and more.

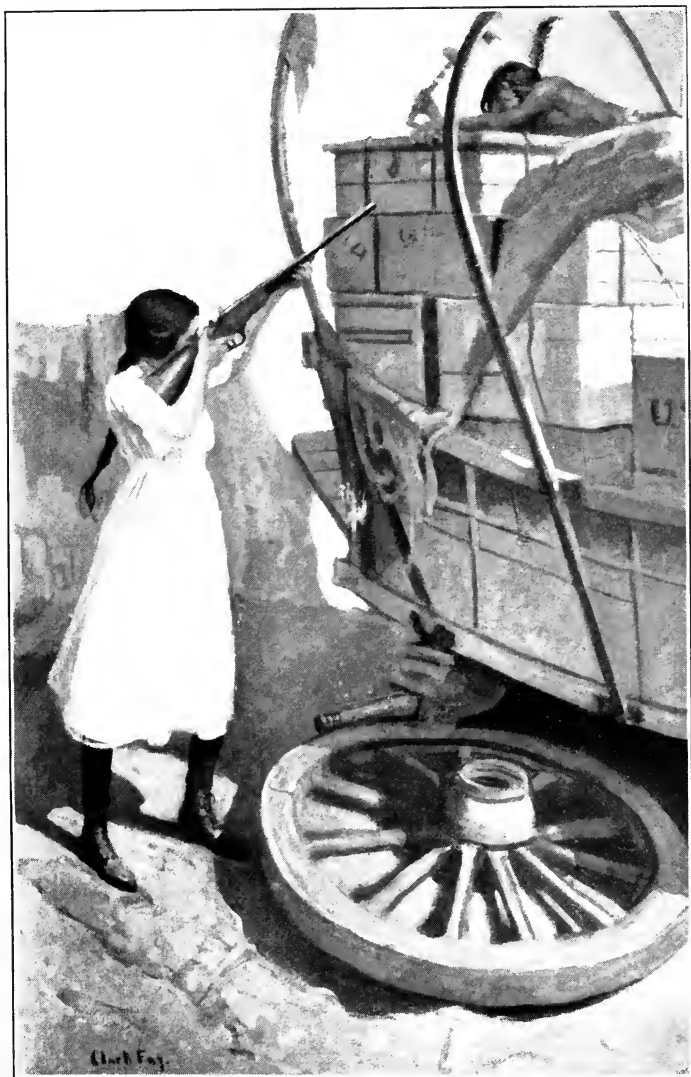
Numbers of the Indians went down in the charge, but it was not stopped until the survivors reached the creek. The footmen had run with the horsemen as the latter came abreast them and as the riders stopped and fired the men on foot sprang across the creek or plunged through it and sought to scale the wall. Some of them actually gained a footing on the shelf. The fighting was of the fiercest description—hand to hand—and in the end it was little Molly who saved the day.

Abandoning for a moment her care of the wounded, she had stood, gun in hand, staring at the awful tumult in front of her. A sound drew her head around and she was horrified to observe a file of Indians coming up the trail to her left!

Engrossed in the bitter conflict raging along their front, and uniting in the determined effort to drive the Indians from the shelf, the men whose business it was to keep watch on that side had turned toward their

hard-pressed comrades. Above all the tumult the sergeant heard Molly scream. He turned to catch a glimpse of her flying toward the extreme left of the half circle of wagons. He did not dare leave the front of the line. To Corporal Schmidt he committed it.

“To the left,” he cried to the veteran, who happened to be nearest him. The experienced soldier needed nothing but that command. Leaving the few men at the front of the barricade still fighting, Schmidt grabbed Marquette and Jackson, who were both yet unharmed, and ran toward Molly. As they started, the plumed head of an Indian rose above the last wagon bed. They would be too late! The Cheyenne, swinging his war hatchet in one hand, a revolver in the other, prepared to leap down into the enclosure, but Molly suddenly presented her rifle and fired. The dead Indian went down backward, carrying with him several others, who were close at his heels. The next moment the three men were at the barricade emptying their own revolvers into the detachment. Ineffectively attempting to return this withering fire, the Indians finally broke and fled.



MOLLY SUDDENLY PRESENTED HER RIFLE AND FIRED

Sunset found the shelf cleared of all assailants, except dead ones, but at fearful cost. Every white man on it was wounded somewhere. There were but five men fit for duty. Three troopers and four teamsters had been killed in the last assault. In a pinch, however, some of the wounded men could still use a rifle effectively. The Indians had been terribly punished. The creek below was choked with dead bodies. They had come on with the most tremendous determination and had persisted in the attack with a tenacity and resolution almost unparalleled in savage warfare. They had evidently had enough for that night at any rate. Marnette and McNeil both felt that there was no further assault to be apprehended until the next morning. Well did the heroic defenders need that respite.

Before all the survivors McNeil caught Molly to his breast.

“My girl,” he said, his heart throbbing with pride, “ ’tis you that saved us. You have the makin’s av a soldier’s wife in you. If it hadn’t been for your schramin——”

“And don’t forget that shot from her rifle, sergeant,” said old Marnette. “Without that

we'd have been done for between Injuns at our backs an' them over there."

"It's proud of you I am," said Bridget McNeil, coming from the ambulance bed. "I'd like to have been there meself, but instead of takin' life I was savin' it."

"What d'ye mean?" asked McNeil.

Bridget lifted her hand. Into the sudden silence broke the thin, small, shrill cry of newborn life!

"It came," she said, "in the midst av the fightin'."

"Is it a bhoy?"

"'Tis a beautiful girl child. If you could have seen the poor mother lyin' there a-clenchin' her hands an' a-lockin' her jaws together wid all the sufferin' an' pain because she said she wouldn't utter a groan or make a sound that might dishturb you or dishtract you or kape you from fightin' your best."

"God an' the saints!" cried McNeil, taking off his cap. "We've got another one to fight for now, bhoys! 'Tis a babby. The daughter av the regiment."

"Three cheers for the daughter of the regiment," said Jackson.

And every man who was able to speak joined in the acclaim. It was almost like the salute to Cæsar of those about to die.

“And how is Mrs. Compton?”

“As well as could be expected. I’m no dochtor, but I did phwhat I could. Now I must have some warrum wather.”

“Wather!” cried McNeil. He looked about him. “There’s not a drap left, an’——”

“An’ we dare not kindle a fire,” said Jackson.

“We must. Somebody’s got to git some wather. We can make a fire down there behind the rocks. I’ve got to have it,” said Bridget doggedly.

“If you’ve got to have it,” said the sergeant, “we’ve got to git it. What the commandin’ officer says goes.”

He was haggard, he was weary, he was wounded, he was overburdened with responsibilities. He had fought like a tiger. Indeed, it was his prowess alone that had saved them in the end. Marnette never forgot how the big sergeant had actually taken one Indian up in his arms and thrown him bodily out into the void by main strength. He loved to

tell the tale in after days around the evening fire, on the lonely trail or in mountain camp.

“An’ if you must have wather, Eridget darlint, I can’t ask or ordher any man to git it. I’ll go meself.”

“Who ever heard of the commandin’ officer appointin’ hisself the water detail?” said Corporal Jackson suddenly. “I’m the freshest one of the bunch. I’ll go. You’re all wounded——”

“Und so are you,” said Schmidt.

“Yes, but it’s only a scratch.”

“Und so iss mine; I go,” said Schmidt.

“Gimme a chance,” cried Bagley, the surviving teamster, who had fought as bravely as any one. “I ain’t a soldier; I can be spared.”

“Now, we’ve been kept out of everything by you soldiers,” urged Marnette. “I guess it’ll be up to me this time.”

They all crowded around McNeil.

“Soldiers an’ gintlemen,” he said quietly, “for so anybody could call you after the fight you put up”—good fighting evidently being the basis of McNeil’s idea of a gentleman—“your ambitions do you honor, an’ I know there ain’t a helpless man here who wouldn’t

be willin' to thry it, but fair play compels me to p'int out that Corp'ral Jackson spoke first. If you can find a bucket that ain't been battered to pieces or shot through an' through you can thry it as soon as it gits darker. Meanwhile the rest of us will pile some rocks up to hide the fire as best we can. I'm thankful the ground runs low at the back. See, there's been a shtrame av bullets gone through the top of the ambulance. Begorry, if it had set higher up, there would have been no baby born this night at all.''

The sun at that season descended early and the mountains cast deep shadows. The twilight was brief. Stripped of his boots and laying aside his weapons, Jackson, carrying the only bucket intact, left the enclosure. He did not propose to descend to the creek in front of the wagon beds. He decided it would be safer for him to go up the canyon a little distance, where the descent was easier and where he could perhaps escape notice if he were fortunate. The four men and the others not too severely wounded to be unmindful of everything watched him glide away in the darkness in his stocking feet.

After a while a shot rang out from the meadow, followed by a number of others. McNeil turned and looked at the other men. Marnette shook his head gloomily.

"It might better haff been me," said the German.

"Or me," said Bagley.

"Well," said McNeil quickly, "we've got to git some wather, not only for Bridget an' Mrs. Compton an' the baby—there's the wounded men without a drap to cool their lips."

"It's risky, but I'll try it this time," said Bagley.

He sat down and began to tug at his boots. The next instant a figure seen dimly in the darkness mounted the wagon bed and stepped slowly down into the enclosure. He was holding a bucket steadily in one hand.

"Jackson!" cried McNeil in low but delighted voice.

"Quick, take the bucket," answered the corporal feebly.

Schmidt took the bucket from him and then, and not until then, did the iron nerve of the man relax.

“They got me,” he said.

He fell forward. McNeil caught him in his arms.

“In the breast,” he murmured. “But I brought the water—for the women—an’ the—baby.”

He collapsed utterly with that last broken word. There was a furious rattle in his throat. McNeil eased him down to the ground. There was a tin candle lantern sitting behind a boulder.

“Fetch it here,” he said in an awe-struck whisper.

Some one handed it to him. Shielding it from the meadow, McNeil turned to the prostrate man. There was a smile on Jackson’s face, but he was dead. McNeil opened his jacket. There was a bullet hole in his breast. His left arm was stained and there was another bullet hole lower down in his body.

“He was hit three times,” he said, “but he had the nerve to bring that bucket back, an’ it’s brimful.”

“An’ never spilled a drop!” said Bagley. “What a man!”

McNeil handed the bucket to Schmidt.

“Take it to Bridget and say it is as precious as the blood av men,” he said. “Tell her to use it carefully, it’s all we’ve got, an’ when it’s gone we can’t git any more.”

“How goes the battle?” asked Mrs. Compton, lying back in her rude bed, a baby head on her arm, as McNeil came over to her after a while.

“We’ve held ’em off to-day, ma’am. We’re good for one more fight for you an’ the babby, too. If Danny got through they’d ought to be here to rescue us in the mornin’.”

“And if they don’t come,” said Mrs. Compton, “and anything happens, you will see that we——”

“We’ll take care av you an’ the child, ma’am,” said McNeil gravely.

“I want you to know what Bridget has been to me to-night.”

“I can guess,” said the sergeant simply. “She’s been everything to me for twinty years.”

“And when Bridget has her washed and dressed I want you to show the baby to the men, if it is safe,” said Mrs. Compton.

“They shall look at the little angel, ma’am,”

said McNeil. "I'm thinkin' it's like to be the only angel some of them'll be after seein' ever at all."

He turned away, leaving Bridget busied over the low fire, where the water was heating, with which she could wash and dress the baby and care for the mother. A rare woman, this army sergeant's wife, and a rare woman to whom she ministered in that ghastly hour on that bloody enclosure in the lonely mountain pass.

She brought the baby out after a while. The soldiers looked at it wonderingly. They put out their big hands and touched it. The wounded turned their eyes upward toward it. They heard it cry again and then Bridget took it back to its mother. There was no rest for Bridget that night. She spent most of the hours with the wounded, and Molly was her brave little assistant.

"If they don't come airly in the mornin'," said McNeil to Schmidt, Marnette, and Bagley, "we're done for."

"I guess that's about right, sergeant," said Marnette.

"Vell, we haff given dem a mighty battle,

und dere iss some fight left in us yet," said Schmidt.

"I don't feel like writing a report to-night, but if I live the colonel shall know what sort of men you are," said McNeil.

"The field will report us, all right," said Bagley.

"Well, we'll have to git ready for the mornin'," said the sergeant, "and plan for desperate further resistance."

The brave men passed the night, somehow, each of them getting a few hours of sleep in turn to fit him for the ghastly exactions to be expected on the morrow.

VIII

HOW DANNY MEAGHER ESCAPED THE INDIANS AND THE RATTLESNAKE

DANNY MEAGHER rode the Indian pony until he was ready to drop. More by good fortune than anything else he succeeded in getting him down to the bank of the river, and as the stream had cut a well-defined way through the sandy soil of the upland, it was not difficult to keep the pony headed along the bank of the river. He urged him forward by every means he possessed and got over the ground at a great rate. It rather went against the trooper's grain to drive the poor horse so, but the supreme necessity justified his ruthless insistence. The pony finally gave out utterly just as the first indications of dawn appeared on the horizon. He refused to take another step; indeed, when Meagher dismounted, the exhausted pony collapsed utterly.

The trooper had reached the great bend of

the river. To the north rose white-headed Cloud Peak, towering over the Big Horn Range. Fort Sullivan lay to the northeastward about fifteen miles. He would have to leave the shelter of the river bed and proceed over the treeless plain until he reached the foothills. There were a few ravines here and there, and before him were the springs of a tributary to the river, which from time immemorial had been a favorite haunt of the buffalo, especially in the summer when the water was scarce elsewhere. Indeed, the ground was broken into huge pits or depressions known as buffalo wallows.

As it was late in the fall there was no water in these wallows. The early winter rains had not yet set in, and the springs themselves were mainly dry. There was water enough for his purposes, however. He filled his canteen, bathed his face and hands, ate a portion of the bread and meat he had brought with him in the pocket of his jacket, drew in his belt a little, and, feeling greatly refreshed by rest, food, and drink, started toward the wallows. The prairie ahead of him was a rolling succession of gentle hills. From the de-

pressions in which he found himself he could see little save the hills and the horizon, except where the mighty range ran to the northward. When he reached the crest of one of the elevations he could catch a glimpse of further hills and, away off to the north and west, always dominant, lay the great bulk of the mountains.

Following the roundabout course of the river, he had traversed some twenty-five or thirty miles of territory and he now deemed himself to be at least ten miles from the canyon wall guarded by the Indians. Mounting the nearest and highest hillock, he surveyed the country for miles in every direction. There was not a sign of an Indian, or of any other human being, for that matter, in any direction. Of course, he realized there might be thousands in the valleys, but there were none on the hills, near or far.

He set out valiantly to walk the distance between him and the post. It was not good walking. In some places the ground was very sandy. In stretches it was overgrown with tough prairie grass, which greatly impeded his footsteps. But through sand or undergrowth,

or up hills or down them, or through valleys or across ravines, he plodded steadily onward for some hours.

From the sun he judged it to be about nine o'clock, and that he had covered about half the distance he had to go, when he decided to sit down and rest. Although he had been extremely fortunate so far, he did not know what demands he would have to meet, and it would not do for him to be utterly worn out. He must husband his resources for a possible emergency. Instinctively he chose a shallow ravine in which to rest as the propriety of concealment was obvious. Indeed, he had never mounted a hill without cautiously reconnoitering before he showed himself over the top of it.

He thought it unlikely that any Indians were behind him on the prairie, but it was not impossible that he might run across a wandering band in front of him. It was warm in the ravine, and he was very tired. He sat down on the sandy bottom and, leaning his shoulders against the bank, closed his eyes.

When he opened them again after a nap,

which he had not meant to take, and the duration of which he did not then have time to determine, he put his hand to the ground preparatory to rising, while compunctions of conscience filled his being. He felt exactly as a soldier might who had slept when at his post of duty. To be sure, there was no one to know it or report it, he realized with a feeling of thankfulness as he slowly turned over and made ready to get to his feet and resume his hard journey.

He had not got any further than his knees—and it was fortunate for him that he had been so unusually deliberate—when he heard voices and the nicker of a pony! He stopped instantly and crouched down to his smallest compass behind the bank. The voices were fearfully near, and he could hear the trampling of the feet of horses. There was no mistaking the Indian tongue. The sodded bank of the ravine rose a foot or two above his head and slightly overhung. As he crouched down he could not see over it at all. He judged from the number of voices and from the commotion made by the ponies that there must be at least half a dozen men on the hillock

just above the ravine. What they were doing there, where they were going, what the moment would bring forth, he could not tell.

The horses were moving, but only restlessly. It was evident that the party had halted. There was a paralyzing sense of impotence in Danny's mind. There was not a single thing he could do but lie there. The ravine was too shallow to hide him if he stood up and there was no use in trying to crawl away. He would be heard and presently he would be seen. Of course, he could sell his life dearly. He reached around and drew his revolver, he had already unslung his rifle and it lay close at hand. But he knew that the fight he would put up would be a hopeless one.

To give him his just due, it was not his own peril that almost stopped his heart, but the sense of the possible, almost certain, failure of his effort to tell the story of his beleaguered, hard-beset comrades and the women that overwhelmed him. He knew that unless help came to them—and unless he told the story in all probability it would not—they would be overwhelmed in the canyon in spite of any

courage, heroism, or desperate, stubborn resolution they might display in defence.

He was a prisoner. Wit and strength and courage of men had failed. Chance only would determine his fate and theirs. No, not chance—Almighty God! The boy prayed as he crouched down there, revolver in hand, as he had never prayed before. The Indians were very deliberate. The soldier remembered that the hillock whence he had descended to the ravine seemed to be the highest for miles around. They appeared to be surveying the country, he gathered. With senses keenly on the alert, scraps of words here and there were all he could understand. He decided that they were riding around the top of the hill and looking in every direction for some trace of him!

He was thankful that for the last mile he had gone down a ravine, which was rocky, so that he had left no "sign" for these keenest of trailers. They had not chanced upon any marks of his progress across the open country, they had not picked up his trail anywhere, and they did not seem to notice the ravine so close at hand, perhaps because they could see

at a glance into every part of it from where they were, except just that very spot where the soldier crouched down.

He berated himself for his dereliction, in the midst of his prayers, because he had gone to sleep, but when he came to think of it, the very fact that he had slept there was what probably saved him, for he had chanced into the one spot in the vicinity invisible from that hill. As a matter of fact, his nap had been a very short one, half an hour at the outside, he decided as he glanced at the sun while he waited alike helpless and almost hopeless.

The suspense was becoming unbearable. He thought that if nothing else discovered his presence, the wild beating of his heart, which sounded in his ears like the roll of a drum, would certainly betray him. The sweat beaded his brow. There was no mirror at hand to tell him how he looked, but his face was as white as the alkali patches over which he had walked; yet his eyes blazed and his mouth was closed in the tense, set line of high resolution.

He had taken a chew of tobacco before he dozed, and the wonder was that it had not

choked him while he slept. It tasted suddenly bitter in his dry mouth, and he made up his mind at once to discard it, when a new and more terrible peril was added to the dangers encompassing him. He had his head turned up staring at the top of the bank a few feet above it, expecting every moment to see the skyline blotted out by the figure of an Indian. They were talking furiously now, and evidently debating some question hotly, when into the man's strained mind penetrated a slight, sibilant hissing sound full of menace. It came from the left of him and he recognized instantly with a thrill of horror as he turned his head in that direction that he was about to be attacked by a rattlesnake!—the deadly *crotalus pyrrhus*, the rare and most venomous red variety.

There, a few feet away from him, the hideous monster was coiled. His head was protruded and his body ready for a spring. It would have been easy for the trooper to have shot the head off the snake or to have sprung back and then cut it in two with the axe or even to have battered it to death with a stone, but if he made the slightest move the Indians

would hear him. And if he did nothing to protect himself, the snake would strike. Either way meant horrible death.

He was filled with horror, but his mind worked quicker than the snake could spring, that is to say, like the lightning flash. That plug of tobacco which he was about to spit out saved him. It was the only weapon at his command. He worked his jaws furiously for a second or two and then he suddenly thrust his face as near the snake as he could without moving his body or making a sound. The reptile had not shaken his rattles yet; if he had, that would have been as bad as a rifle shot, for it would have attracted the attention of the Indians, and one of them would have ridden over to the ravine to kill it. Before the snake could move, before he could make the spring for which he was coiled, before he could shake that cluster of rattles on his tail, the soldier spat out.

The mouth and eyes of the snake were filled with tobacco juice. The effect was surprising. The bewildered creature, his eyes and mouth smarting, with a venom and a poison the like of which he had never experienced, fell back-

ward blindly writhing and glided noiselessly away. The trooper could have shrieked in the nervous reaction. It was only by the most terrific effort that he kept from crying aloud as his body shook and trembled with the awful strain. He felt that it was all up with him. He could control himself no longer. For a moment he had an impulse to rise and shout and fight.

The next instant the Indians above him on the hillock got in motion. The listener heard words here and there. The ponies' feet thudded on the soft ground and away they galloped. He listened for a few moments, to be sure that they were riding from and not toward him, and then collapsed utterly in the ravine. He lay there on his face shivering and shaking and sobbing like a girl. He had escaped by the providence of God and his own wit two of the deadliest perils of the West—the Indian and the rattlesnake. The venomous serpent was still writhing in the bottom of the ravine some distance off, blind and overwhelmed by the acrid tobacco juice.

Danny lay limp and helpless until the sound of the footsteps died away. He listened for

some time thereafter before making a move, for one of the Indians might have been left on the hillock as a watchman, but he heard absolutely no sound. Finally he cautiously raised his head and peered over the edge of the ravine. There was no one there. The hillock shut off the view of the direction in which the Indians had gone. He stood up and looked about him. He was alone once more.

He took a huge stone and put the snake out of its misery, cut the rattles off as a souvenir of his peril, and then on his hands and knees he climbed the hillock. Away off to the southward he saw a little group of Indians. They appeared to be galloping back in the direction of the camp whence they had come. He surmised they had been sent to get him, and having failed to find his trail, had gone back toward the canyon in hope that they might intercept him there.

It seemed to the soldier that now at last he was free from any further perils. He descended the hillock to the ravine, which happened to run in his direction. He picked up his rifle and axe and ran desperately down it. When it bent to the northward he left it. He

climbed another hill and once more surveyed the country and found he was still alone. He decided that he would make a run for the post. He broke into a long, easy dog-trot, which he had learned from the Indians, and at high noon he stopped, panting, exhausted, dust-covered, his throat parched, his legs heavy as lead, before the gate of the wooden stockade of Fort Sullivan.

IX

SETS FORTH THE DEPARTURE OF THE FIRST SQUADRON TO RE- LIEVE THE BESIEGED

THE sentry on the tower at the corner of the big stockade discovered the approach of Danny Meagher while he was yet a great way off. He saw that the newcomer was running hard, and from his wavering and uncertain gait it was evident that he had been running a long time, and was almost at the end of his strength. The sentry watched him for a few moments and then carefully scrutinized the far horizon back of the rapidly approaching figure. If there were Indians in his rear it would account for the apparently desperate effort of the man to reach the post, toward which he was heading. But there was not a solitary figure to be seen upon the horizon, except the runner.

There was a field glass handy. The sentry seized it, focused it, and looked for a long

time. He made out that the man was clothed in a brown leather hunting suit, although he appeared to be carrying the rifle of a soldier. At first it popped into the sentry's mind that it might be old Marnette, of whose departure every one was aware, but the glass negatived that idea. The soldier could see that the man was white and that was all.

As the runner drew nearer the sentry turned and called the corporal of the guard. That worthy forthwith joined him on the observation platform and after steady staring decided that the matter was of sufficient importance to be referred to the sergeant of the guard. He, in turn, reported it to the young officer of the day, who made haste to join the others on the platform.

Now, within the somewhat restricted limits of the stockade everything that went on was more or less public property. The successive appearance of the various persons on the platform of the observation tower was noticed by one and then another and finally by everybody. The officers and men at once sought places whence they could see what was happening. Finally old General Allenby, the commander

of the regiment, himself came out of his quarters with the adjutant, and, suddenly aware of the unusual excitement, stopped by the foot of the tower and hailed to know what was toward.

“There’s a runner coming in, sir.”

“A soldier?” asked the general.

“We don’t know, sir. He doesn’t wear a uniform. Sergeant Peters thinks he recognizes him. He will be here in a moment.”

“Let us go out of the gate, Mr. Tyson,” said the general to the adjutant. “We can afford to take chances with one man,” he continued, smiling grimly, for his regiment had been roughly handled by the Indians, and the men had been never so thankful as when they reached Fort Sullivan only yesterday night with their wounded and sick, chief of whom was Major Compton, who was still alive, although that was about all that could be said of him. The two officers ordered the gate unbarred and opened and stepped without. By this time the messenger was close at hand. The general stared at him. There was something familiar about him. But it was Tyson, before whom Danny had appeared

more than once for various small evidences of his ebullient spirits, who recognized him.

“That will be Trooper Meagher of Calmore’s troop, sir.”

The general threw his head back toward the gate. Several officers were coming through to join the commander. He recognized the man he sought.

“Captain Calmore,” he cried sharply.

“Sir.”

“You know that man?”

Calmore took a long look.

“It’s Trooper Meagher, although what he is doing without his uniform I don’t know.”

“Was he one of Sergeant McNeil’s detachment?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Umph!” said the general. “Looks bad. Better have the assembly sounded, Mr. Tyson, and then officers’ call. Now, my man, what is it?” he continued, facing Meagher as Tyson turned away to carry out the command.

Danny Meagher was fairly dropping from fatigue. He was pale as death. His eyes were bloodshot. His face was covered with sweat and dust, and he was in a state of almost

complete exhaustion. He did not realize until he stopped at what a desperate pace he had covered the last half dozen miles of his journey. By a brave effort he drew himself up, brought his moccasined heels together, raised his hand, and saluted like a good soldier. The general promptly acknowledged the courtesy.

“Out with it,” he said.

“For the Lord’s sake, sor,” whispered Danny with parched lips, “could I have a drink?”

“Water, here,” cried the general, “and whiskey. The man’s nearly done for. Here, my man”—he pointed to a pile of wood on the side of the trail left there by one of the logging parties—“sit down.”

“Thank you, sor,” said Danny, taking a long pull from one of the canteens offered him. “I come from Sergeant McNeil.”

“Yes, where is he?”

“About ten miles from the mouth av Turkey Creek Canyon, at the Big Meadows, sor,” was the answer.

“Go on.”

“When I left he was camped on a shelf av rock overlookin’ the meadows, an’ there was

five hundred Sioux an' Cheyennes attackin' him, sor."

"Good God!" exclaimed Captain Calmore amid a general movement of astonishment and alarm.

The general threw up his hand for silence.

"What time did you leave?"

"Jist at dark last night, sor."

"It's all of forty miles," said the general, who knew the country like a book. "You have come through in quick time."

"Sergeant McNeil bid me say, sor, wid his respectful compliments, that he'd hould the place as long as there was a man alive, sor, an' then shoot the women an' children, an'——"

"I know McNeil," said the general quickly. "He will do what he said."

"I know him, too," came from Calmore amid a chorus of hearty approval from the other officers.

"He directed me to say, sor, that if you'd plaise come as quick as you can, it'd be helpful to the women, of which there are three, Mrs. Compton, his wife, an' his daughter, an' perhaps, praise be to God, there is another wan by now, although she might be a boy."

“What do you mean?” asked the general sharply.

“If the general plaises, Mrs. Compton——” began Danny.

“Oh, I recollect,” said the general. “Great heavens, what a situation!”

“An’ he said, sor, would you plaise send a dochtor wid the relievin’ force?”

The general nodded again. Back in the fort the bugles were ringing the assembly, the old call preparatory to action, and as its cadences died away it was followed by the officers’ call.

“Meet me at my office, gentlemen, and one or two of you see that this man is well cared for, and fetch him over to headquarters as soon as he is able to move.”

“I’m able to go along wid the general now, sor,” said Danny stoutly, rising to his feet indomitably.

“Good,” said the general. “Come along. You have done well. I’ll hear the details of your story later.”

“Gentlemen,” he said to the officers whom he met at his office a little later—most of them had heard his little colloquy with the messenger, by the way—“Sergeant McNeil’s detach-

ment and Major Compton's wife and Bridget and Molly McNeil and the valuable little wagon train are attacked in heavy force. How many did you say there were?"

"They looked like a million to me, sor," answered Meagher, "but ould Marnette——"

"Oh, did he get there?" interrupted Calmore.

"Yis, sor, after bein' wounded, but not bad. He said there was about five hundred av 'em——warriors, that is——wid their women an' children."

"McNeil entrenched himself, of course?"

"Yis, sor."

"How?"

"Behind the wagon beds on a shelf opposite the Big Meadows in Turkey Creek Canyon."

"I know the place," said Calmore.

"And I—and I——" repeated the others.

"We can trust McNeil to uphold the honor of the regiment and defend the place to the last extremity. Trooper Meagher left last night——"

"Fine work, sir," said Calmore.

"Very. It must be thirty miles as the crow flies, and forty miles across country. I pro-

pose to send the four troops of the first squadron—Compton's—to rescue the party. Vacancies caused by illness or wounds will be filled from the second squadron."

The officers of the first squadron broke into spontaneous cheers. Those of the second looked very glum and disappointed.

"The second bore the brunt of the fighting last month," continued the general, as his eyes swept the room filled with officers. "Captain Calmore, you haven't had the chance for active service the others have enjoyed—to you the command. Surgeon Ormond, you will go with the party. Take whatever you may need for the unusual demand you are certain to meet."

"Thank you, general," exclaimed the delighted Calmore.

"How about your horses and the train mules?" continued the general, turning to Meagher.

"We had to turn 'em loose in the meadow, sor. The Injuns got 'em all.

"Umph, I suppose so. Well, we'll have to use the troop horses to bring back the wagons. I can't send any mules along because I want

you to go fast, Calmore. You can take your time returning with the wounded."

"Am I to go now, sir?" asked Calmore eagerly.

"Instantly," said the general. "And remember that your orders are to rescue that party and bring them back, and not to be led into pursuit of the Indians. That will be task enough for you or anybody."

"I understand, sir," said Captain Calmore.

"Mr. Tyson," said the general, "you will prepare the orders. The men will carry everything they need on their persons, or in their saddlebags, no baggage train, and, Calmore, I am doubtful whether you will get there in time at best, but spare neither man nor horse so long as you keep the command together. Five hundred Indians is no small task even for two hundred and forty of ours to attempt. It is probably a band from Crazy Horse's command, and we know how they can fight."

"If the general plaises," said Meagher, "but Marnette said it was Dull Knife's band."

"And that old rascal is one of the best. We'll never have peace along the frontier as long as he's alive."

“Have you any orders, general?” asked Calmore.

“None,” answered the general. “I leave everything to you.”

Calmore saluted and ran from the room, followed by all of the officers of the first squadron. As it happened, the captain of one of the troops was wounded, the captains of two other troops were on detached service, and the remaining troop was Calmore's own. Indeed, it was the absence of these other soldiers which permitted the command to be given to so young a captain as Calmore. He had under him a group of youngsters, lieutenants, hard riders, and gallant fighters, just the crowd for a dash and a fight.

The men of the regiment were already drawn up outside on the parade ground. Calmore briefly communicated the general's orders to the first squadron, then he ordered the men to break ranks and go to their quarters and equip themselves for the expedition. He allowed them ten minutes for the task. Before he dismissed them he explained what that task was, what they were expected to do.

Now, the first squadron was Compton's own,

and every man felt a direct personal interest in the work cut out for him. The commander of the second squadron conferred briefly with Calmore and detailed enough men to fill out the vacancies in the four troops. The veterinarians and the stable sergeants also replaced every horse which showed any signs of unfitness for the hard march with the best available from the other squadron.

Calmore's own preparations were soon completed. Booted and spurred and armed, he was ready in five minutes. There was one duty he had to perform. The hospital was adjacent to his quarters, and he went into Compton's room. That officer was lying completely helpless on his bed. He had reached the post in the worst possible condition he could exhibit and still be alive, but one day in a comfortable bed with clean linen, warm water, and careful nursing had already wrought wonders.

"I heard the bugle calls," he whispered, as his trusty junior bent over his bandaged face, "and then cheering. I thought first that McNeil's party had got in, but my wife has not joined me and—what is it?"

“It’s a messenger from McNeil, Compton,” said Calmore, dropping distinction of rank in this informal intercourse between friends.

“Yes? What’s the news?” asked the major, his thin hand clenched but his voice steady like a soldier’s.

“They have been overtaken by a large band of Sioux and Cheyennes.”

“How many?”

“Five hundred.”

“And McNeil had but twenty men and the drivers.”

“He seems to have acted with discretion and courage and conduct, for he entrenched on that shelf in the canyon by the Big Meadows. The messenger——”

“Who?”

“Trooper Meagher.”

“Good boy!”

“Got in ten minutes ago with an appeal for help.”

“And my wife?”

“Well and cheerful when Meagher left. The general has given me command of the first squadron, ours. We are to ride immediately to bring them back.”

“If anybody on earth can do it you can, Calmore, and the troopers of that squadron. Say to them that I know they will do all that officers and soldiers can do, and that I would almost give the rest of my life to go along. My soul rides with them.”

“Your spirit will animate us, old friend,” said Calmore. “And—keep up your courage.”

“Tell my wife, if you get there in time, that I am living just to see her again.”

“We’ll get there in time. I’ll tell her. Good-bye.”

“God bless you!”

Calmore hurried out of the room. His orderly was walking his horse up and down in front of the hospital. He sprang into the saddle and trotted toward his command. The general and the officers, who were to remain behind with their wives and children, were grouped around the gate. The other squadron of the regiment was lined up on the opposite side as if for a review. The band was out. The old general loved to do things up in style. He was going to play them out in fine form. Calmore rode to the head of the squadron.

“Men,” he said, raising his voice, “we are to ride to rescue McNeil and his detachment, our comrades in this squadron. But we are to ride for more than men. There are women there. McNeil’s wife and his daughter and the wife of our major. He would give his life to be here. He sends you this message: ‘I know that you will do all that officers and soldiers can do, and my soul rides with you. I know that if anybody on earth can do it, you men can.’ ”

Amid frantic cheering, Calmore turned to the general and saluted.

“Forward, at once!” said the old soldier, and Calmore gave the command which put the squadron in column and motion.

The band struck up the famous marching song of the regiment. At a walk first, then at a slow trot, the detachment passed rapidly through the gates, the old general standing hand in salute as the lean, hard-bitten, brown, weather-beaten troopers of his beloved regiment rode gallantly forth on their desperate errand.

With the first troop of the squadron rode Danny Meagher. He had appealed directly

to the general and had begged to be allowed to join the expedition.

“Since I have eaten an’ drunk,” said Danny, “an’ since I’ve seen the squadron coming, I want to go back in the field. I feel like a new man already, sor, an’ I can ride wid the best of ’em. I want to be in at the death, sor. Why, it’d be like desartin’ the command if I stayed back here an’ rested. There’ll be time enough to rest when we’ve rescued them.”

The old general had laughed grimly. It was the sort of spirit he liked.

“That’s the kind of men I want in my regiment,” he said. “You shall go, Meagher, and you shall have the best horse in the regiment to carry you.”

“Any ould thing will do for me that gits there, sor,” said Danny.

“My black stallion will get you there,” said the general. “Orderly, tell the stable sergeant to give the black to Trooper Meagher.”

Tired though he was, Danny was grinning widely from the back of the general’s horse in his humble place in the ranks of the troop which trotted by.

X

HOW THEY ARRIVED IN THE VERY NICK OF TIME

CALMORE was an experienced soldier. He knew that he had a long, hard ride before him, and that if he tired his horses out at the beginning he would pay up for it before he got through. The country he had to traverse was execrable. Over the prairie in the direction of Turkey Creek Canyon there was scarcely a sign of a road. The land was rolling and broken and sandy, in places cut by ditches and as the result of the long dry season now covered with dust. It was thirty miles to the mouth of the canyon, and he judged he could not possibly reach it before dark. Trail, there was practically none.

The main point of supply was on another railroad to the far north of Fort Sullivan. Very few things were sent by the road that ran south and west, and the canyon was not

very much used. Mrs. Compton had come that way because it was nearer Omaha and quicker, and the little emergency wagon train had been sent that way for the same purpose.

In some places it would be necessary to go up the canyon in single file and at a walk, so bad was the trail. Although he had the pick of the horses, they were by no means fresh, for the regiment, except his own troop, part of which was with McNeil, had been in the field for the whole of the summer, and the men had just got back to Fort Sullivan the day before. Nothing short of the great peril that menaced the detachment would have brought the general to order the fagged-out horses and the equally worn and wearied troopers to the field. Even if the horses and men had been fresh, it would have been night before they could reach the mouth of the canyon. In their present condition it would undoubtedly take much longer.

Calmore could not allow any straggling. He had to keep his command closed up, and the speed of it was the speed of the slowest horse. If they had all been in as fine fettle as the general's big black stallion, so proudly

bestrode by Trooper Meagher, there would have been a mad race across the country, such as romancers love to dwell upon, and the party might have been rescued before nightfall, but in real life things do not happen that way. When the rolling ground was firm and hard they trotted, when it was sandy and heavy they walked, and sometimes they walked very slowly indeed. Occasionally detours to get across ditches were necessary.

The flankers were thrown out, a scouting force marched ahead. No precautions were neglected. Six o'clock found them at least six miles from the mouth of the canyon. The foothills of the range loomed before them in the growing dusk of the short autumn day, while back of them rose the snow-capped peaks of the mighty mountains through which the canyon ran. They had reached the big spring beyond the buffalo wallow, and here Calmore made a halt, that the men might eat from their haversacks and stretch their legs, and the horses might be off-saddled, watered, and given a brief rest. Every man was aching to be on the march, Calmore as much as the others, but he held them there for a full hour.

There was not an Indian in sight. Fires were kindled, coffee was made, the men brought out their pipes, and, except those on picket duty, they all stretched themselves out on the sand for a very much needed rest. Calmore and his youthful troop commanders had an earnest discussion with Trooper Meagher, Danny's topographical eye was remarkable, and he could explain the whole situation. They heard for the first time the details of his wonderful escape up the canyon, his mad ride on the Indian pony, the ruse by which he discomfited the rattlesnake, and the narrowness by which he avoided discovery by the Indians. He told them how the land lay. He even traced in the sand a map of the shelf on the trail overlooking the meadows.

"I wonder how it would do to send one troop along the north wall of the canyon to go down where Meagher climbed up the wall; while the rest of us go up the canyon so as to take them behind two fires?" asked one of the juniors.

"It would not do at all, sor, savin' your presence, because there's Injuns up there, a lot of 'em, an' you wouldn't git by 'em widout

a fight, an' all chances of surprise would be lost," the young trooper ventured to reply.

"True, Meagher is right," said Calmore. "Besides, there are so few of us and so many of them that I dare not attempt a rescue with a divided command. Our best plan, I think, will be for all of us to go directly to the mouth of the canyon, to drive up it as fast as we can, and when we get to the meadows open out and slam into them."

"I think that's the better way," said the senior troop commander present.

"Well, gentlemen," said Calmore, rising, "I hate to do it, but it will be 'boots and saddles.' "

No bugle was blown, of course, but the word was passed, the horses were brought up and saddled, the men took a last drink at the spring and filled their canteens, the horses were given another watering, and at the word of command they moved off again.

Meagher, who naturally knew the country better than most of the others, rode in advance by the side of Calmore. It had grown dark by this time, and progress was slower than ever. The men were fretting because of the

delay, but it was impossible to go faster. It was nearly ten o'clock before they reached the mouth of the canyon. It would be five in the morning at the rate they were going before they got up to the Big Meadows.

The experienced Indian fighters in the party knew that it was most unusual for the Indians to attack in force after dark. If McNeil had succeeded in beating off his assailants during the day, the relief might reasonably expect to find the survivors in possession of the place at dawn. They did not linger on that account, however, but pressed resolutely on. Calmore and the soldier who seemed made of iron—he forgot his want of sleep and his fatigue as he approached nearer the conflict—rode ever in the lead. There were one or two levels where they could even gallop. Calmore did not spare the horses now. Being now almost within striking distance he gave to the pursuit everything that the animals had, and took advantage of every bit of ground to come on at the best speed. Still there were places where single file and slow walk were necessary in the narrowing, ever rising canyon.

At midnight halt was made for water and

a fifteen-minute rest, although the horses were not unsaddled. Half the distance up the canyon had been traversed, but the other half was the harder part. The trail steadily ascended, and the increasingly high altitude made it more and more difficult to move rapidly, and the horses grew more and more weary. It was four o'clock in the morning when they reached the highest point in the trail. Rounding a sharp bend in the canyon they could see before them in the faint glow of the coming dawn the narrow lower end of the meadow. The plain began to broaden out beyond the curve and to the left, the southern side. A few rods ahead of them there was an easy descent to the level of the brook, and on the other side of the brook grass land began, which presently developed into the great meadow.

The place where Calmore and Meagher stopped was the last spot which had been held by Schmidt and his detachment to delay the Indians while the camp was being made on the shelf. And it was the same place where poor Seddon had been captured. Sentries should have been posted there, but possibly because the Indians realized that they could seize their

helpless prey in the morning none were on watch. Owing to the intervening cliff and the broken out-jutting north wall of the canyon, the soldiers could not see the barricade. In fact they could only see the far southern portion of the meadow, under the opposite canyon wall. In that direction faint lights twinkled in the valley, embers apparently of dying fires. The Indians were evidently still there, and if they, the soldiers also.

Calmore was far in advance of the column trailing in single file for a mile back of him. He surveyed the country critically. He determined to send three troops and a half down the slope to cross the brook and gallop up the meadow. The other half-troop he intended to dismount and advance along the trail toward the shelf. The troopers headed for the meadow would have to make a big detour before they got to the meadow, and the men on foot would probably make as good time as the others. As fast as the troopers came up he sent them quickly down, and halted them on the little level of grass land.

The troops were facing westward, their backs against the northeast wall of the canyon.

The sun when it came up was over their shoulders and they were still in the shadow, so they were not observed by any one in the Indian camp. Indeed the only place they could be seen from the Indian camp was the single spot where they defiled to the left and descended to the level of the brook. But the Indians were not looking or expecting any enemy in that direction. Those on the brink of the canyon above could see nothing. The troopers, however, could see the Indian encampment as the sun's rays, falling over the top of the canyon, began to illuminate the valley.

Calmore waited until the last man had passed. He had got his dismounted squad ready for its march, and then followed by Meagher, whom he had made his orderly, he was about to ride down to the three troops and a half which were lined up and ready at the beginning of the meadow, when a sudden movement in the Indian camp caught his eye.

"Look yonder, sor," said Meagher eagerly.

In his excitement he touched his officer on the shoulder. Calmore and the trooper saw the Indians mounting their ponies and apparently assembling for a final attack. Many

of them rushed across the meadow and the sweetest sound that ever came to the hearts of those men was the crack of a rifle from the mountainside. There was evidently some one still alive in that barricade. Thank God, they were in time!

“You know what you have to do,” said Calmore, turning to the dismounted troopers under Hadden, their lieutenant, who had just come from West Point the previous June, and had seen no service. “We’ll try to crowd them over against the bank. Then you give it to them.”

“Very good, sir,” said Hadden, saluting and marching off at the head of his platoon.

“No firing until I give the order,” said Calmore to the squadron. “Now, gentlemen, forward.”

At a slow trot the little command in a column of fours moved up the narrow valley. The brook and the tail of the meadow, as it were, swept to the southward. The grass land, which was fairly green and firm enough to give them good footing, widened so that they had plenty of room for manœuvering. Just as they reached the last turn before the

meadow Calmore deployed the troops. He formed the battalion in a double line and bade them open out as they advanced so as to cover the whole width of the valley. He shot a glance to the northward. He could see in the shadows that Hadden's detachment was about to pass the last bend and enter the valley where they would be in plain sight. He decided to wait a moment or two, believing that the Indians might be attracted by the apparently small numbers of the relief force to attack them on the open face of the cliff. He rode down the lines explaining what he wanted the men to do and what he hoped to effect.

“When I give the word I want you to trot until you get to that bend. When you get around it, ride like blazes right at them. Don't use pistols or sabres until you come to close quarters.”

He rode forward until he could see down the valley, which was now filling with smoke from a continuous discharge. Sure enough the Indians caught sight of Hadden's little party. They swerved off to their left and galloped rapidly in the direction of the little band now revealed in all its small numbers in full

view. Hadden's men sought cover and protection behind boulders on the trail and waited. As the Indians drew nearer they coolly prepared to open fire.

The crash of the first discharge was Calmore's signal. He turned and lifted his hand. The Indians were in plain view. As the line swung across the valley Calmore gave the command to fire. A withering rifle volley swept over the meadow, and then into the smoke the troopers threw themselves at full speed, yelling like mad and driving the spurs into their horses' flanks and getting such swiftness out of the tired animals as no one would have supposed them capable of after all they had gone through.

At the same instant Hadden's men rose, and recklessly exposing themselves, fired volley after volley. The Indians, assailed on both sides and completely surprised, were driven into a bunch which afforded a splendid target. But there were soldiers—generals that is—among the Indians as well. They had been surprised and attacked at a great disadvantage. They had no further stomach for a close fight. The losses of the few hot moments

of that morning together with those that had been inflicted by the gallant defence had seriously depleted their ranks. Flight was their only desire. Yet there were women and children and herds that had to be protected. They scattered out and as the impetus of the charge spent itself they withdrew in fair order, skirmishing bravely and contesting every foot of the ground. They were better mounted than the soldiers, and better armed, and they circled around with dazzling swiftness, keeping up a continuous fire, while slowly and steadily giving back.

The valley rang with rifle shots and was soon covered with smoke. The squaws needed no urging. Indeed tepees had already been struck, for the Indians knew that they could finish the defenders on the shelf in the morning and they had made their preparations to get out. Skirmishing and holding back the charge and fighting hard, and they were at hand-to-hand grips for part of the time here and there, the brave, if savage, warriors finally had the satisfaction of seeing their women and children and herds escaping up the canyon. They halted in the narrow gorge

above the meadows and here the chiefs dismounted their men and prepared for a desperate defence, if assailed.

Calmore would have liked nothing better than to have carried the place by assault, but there were already a dozen riderless horses in his squadron and there were many men who clung to their saddles helplessly from wounds more or less severe. Contenting himself with throwing out a line of skirmishers lest the Indians should attempt to return to the meadow, which they showed no disposition to do, he rode toward the shelf which had been the scene of so memorable a defence.

XI

WHEREIN THE BABY IS INTRODUCED TO HER FATHER

LEAVING the task of gathering up the stray horses which had escaped from the Indian herd, of seizing and destroying the Indian camp, and securing the valley against any possible return of the Indian charge to his subordinates, Calmore, followed by Meagher, who stuck to his heels, galloped to the trail and joined Hadden, with whom Dr. Ormond had marched, and whose men were sent back for the horses. The three officers and the trooper, all having dismounted, ran toward the barricade.

It was as still as death behind the splintered, bullet-torn ring of wagon beds.

“I wonder,” said Calmore, struggling over the rocky pass, “if there’s anybody alive.”

“I hope we’re not too late,” said Hadden.

The next moment the four men stopped, petrified. The battle had moved far up the

meadows. The distant crack of a few random rifle shots could be heard, but it was painfully still in the barricade save for one sound that came from it and that was a cry with which most of the men, for they were all bachelors, were strangely unfamiliar and yet it was unmistakable. It was the cry of a baby. The four looked at one another.

"There is one living," said Calmore, starting forward.

"You got here too late, doc," said Hadden. "Somebody else was on the job."

"That will be Bridget McNeil, sor," said Meagher.

"Oh, I don't know," said the doctor. "I guess there'll be plenty of work for me."

"We will soon find out," said Calmore.

He scrambled over the wagon bed, passing the dead Indians who had been shot when Molly had given the alarm. No effort had been made to dispose of their bodies, of course.

"It's been a fearfully near thing," he said to his companions as he leaped down into the little enclosure. "And these men will never be forgotten."

The little barricade was lined with dead,

dying, desperately wounded men. They were mostly in their places, where they had been shot, rifles and pistols by their sides, their heads pointed toward the meadow. The few wounded earlier in the fight had been dragged to the rear. There was not a man in the enclosure who had not been hurt. Three or four, badly wounded, lay on their backs staring upward. A few feeble moans broke from their lips. Those who were conscious stifled them. They did not want to alarm Mrs. Compton, it appeared afterward.

Sitting on the ground, his empty Winchester across his knee, his revolver in his hand, his back against the ambulance bed and the top of his head bound with a bloody bandage, his lips white, his eyes blazing, was Sergeant McNeil. Half reclining on his elbow, revolver in hand, lay Scout Marnette. In addition to the first wound in his side, he had been shot in the leg and could not walk. With a broken arm, his revolver clasped in his right hand, Corporal Schmidt was leaning his breast heavily against a rock. All three of the men were close by the ambulance. It was quite evident that they intended to sell their lives dearly if the In-

dians broke in, which the four new-comers were certain they would have done in another half hour if the relief party had not arrived.

Just in front of the parted entrance of the ambulance stood Bridget McNeil. Clinging to her skirts was a much-dishevelled, very badly frightened little girl, her arm in a sling, and a bloody scratch across her cheek. Bridget McNeil stood erect and apparently unharmed. In her right hand she had a Winchester rifle, in her left she carefully clasped to her breast an odd-shaped bundle, and, as the officers stared, from that bundle came again that strange cry. Calmore took off his cap as he had stood in the presence of a nobler than Queen Guinevere or more knightly souls than those that sat with King Arthur about the table round.

McNeil made an effort to rise, failed, dropped the revolver, raised his hand to his head.

“I have to report, sor,” he said hoarsely, “that we have been in action wid Dull Knife’s band of Sioux an’ Cheyennes. We have bate them off, sor, wid heavy loss to them an’ to ourselves; the women an’ children, barrin’

a slight wound or two to the young one yonder, who would take part in the fightin', are safe. We had to let the horses an' mules go, sor, an' the thrain——"

"McNeil," said Calmore, "there has not been a more gallant defence in the whole history of the United States Army. Where is Mrs. Compton?"

"She's here, sor," said Bridget, "an' wantin' a doctor mighty bad."

Calmore and Surgeon Ormond stepped to the ambulance.

"Mrs. Compton," said Calmore, the surgeon parted the curtains and crept within, "I only want to say you are safe now."

"Thank God!" whispered Marion Compton faintly, "and the brave men who held the pass."

"You may well say that. Now, here is the doctor, to do for you what he can."

But the major's brave wife, looking deathly white and most ethereally lovely, waved the doctor away.

"Bridget McNeil has taken care of me. I can wait, doctor. I know there are men out there, though they stifle their groans, who

need you more than I. See," she said, "I was ready."

Her hand extended itself to a loaded revolver that lay upon the cover. It was doubtful if she could have lifted it or pulled the trigger, but it was mute evidence of the spirit that was within her.

"And have you seen the baby?" she asked as the doctor started to leave.

"We've heard her cry," answered Ormond, smiling cheerfully, "and I'm happy to say it's as healthy a cry as I ever listened to. After I see to the men, poor fellows, I will come back to you."

"Doctor, my husband?"

"Doing well and awaiting you at the post," was the comforting reply.

"How is she?" asked Calmore as the doctor rejoined them.

"I haven't made any investigation. She looks like a terribly ill woman. I have no doubt Bridget McNeil did the best she knew how for her and the men."

Nineteen of them were dead, either killed outright or had succumbed to wounds. The survivors were Sergeant McNeil, Corporal

Schmidt, Marnette, Teamster Bagley, and three troopers; all of whom were wounded, more or less badly though not mortally. The Indians had managed to take away the bodies of most of their slain, except those on the shelf and those who had been shot by the relief expedition that morning. But there was no doubt that they had lost heavily. Perhaps their casualties in the three days of fighting may have amounted to one hundred, and there were at least threescore of dead ponies lying in the meadow.

Neither McNeil nor Marnette could walk or ride horses. Schmidt, the teamster Bagley, and the three privates could manage on a pinch. Molly's wound was merely a scratch, and nobody on earth could have been prouder of it than she. When Captain Calmore patted her on the head after learning how she had saved them at the barricade, and how she had taken her place with the rest with her rifle on that last terrible day, she was the happiest girl in Wyoming.

Having done all that could be done for the wounded men and Molly, Dr. Ormond was at last able to devote his attention to Marion

Compton, who sadly needed his care. The best treatment she received, however, was the news that her husband was alive and safe at the post, and that there had been a marked improvement in his condition and that he was consumed with anxiety about her. The surgeon finally left her in very much better shape than he had believed possible.

“Now what is to be done, doctor and gentlemen?” asked Calmore of the young officers of his command, having assembled them for counsel in the meadows.

“It’s ghastly,” said Ormond decisively, “to think of moving Mrs. Compton and the wounded over this horrible trail, and through the foothills, and then across that rough prairie, but we’ve got to get them to the hospital quick.”

The Indian fire had destroyed some of the running gears of the wagons, but enough remained to complete at least three of them. The beds that had suffered the least were chosen and the more valuable contents were repacked in them. The ambulance, of course, was among these and every preparation was made for the comfortable carriage of Mrs.

Compton and two entirely incapacitated soldiers.

Calmore, in view of their hard day and night march and their exhausting battle, gave the whole command a rest, deciding not to undertake the march back until the next morning. The tired troopers slept under the protection of strong guards, and no attempt was made by the Indians to molest them. They had had enough evidently. Indeed, cautious scouting the next morning disclosed the fact that the whole band had gone up the canyon and about their own business. They had received severe punishment in any case, and even if Calmore had been able to follow them his orders absolutely prevented.

The next morning they buried the dead at the foot of the cliff, in front of the shelf they had so gallantly defended, with their faces looking across the meadow, which they had swept with bullets with such deadly effect. Covering them with the biggest stones they could move, prayers were recited by the captain, and over them three volleys that echoed and re-echoed over the meadow and through the great canyon were fired. Then followed

the music of taps, the soldier's "lights out and farewell," after which they took up the march.

They had got together scratch teams from the captured horses to draw the wagons and the ambulance. They went slowly, at a snail's pace, of course, and the eager troopers worked like laborers clearing the trail in order that the wagons carrying the wounded and the women might proceed as easily and as smoothly as possible. But it was a fearful journey in spite of all they could do. Indeed, sometimes they unhitched the horses and fairly carried the ambulance over some of the rough places. It had taken the soldiers from noon till dawn to reach the meadows. Two noons and two dawns passed before they reached the welcoming gates in the wooden walls of Fort Sullivan.

The whole command was out to receive them, from the general down to the non-coms.' wives from "Suds Row." A frantic burst of cheering arose as the wagons drew near. But as they saw the grave face of Calmore galloping ahead of the rest, who came on more slowly, strained silence succeeded. Calmore

swung himself from his horse and saluted the general.

“Well, Calmore, well?” said the old man.

“The women and children are safe, sir. Molly McNeil slightly wounded. Mrs. Compton as well as could be expected. The baby——”

“Ah!”

“It was born the night Meagher left the camp.”

“Girl or a boy?”

“Girl, sir; doing well.”

“And the men?”

“I brought back McNeil, Schmidt, Marquette, Bagley, and three troopers.”

“And the rest?”

“We buried them on the field, sir.”

“Good heavens! And the survivors?”

“Every one of them wounded. The doctor thinks they will all recover.”

“Get away from the gate!” cried the general sharply.

There was no cheering now. Calmore had spoken clearly and his voice carried. The ambulance drew abreast the little group of officers. The general took off his cap and stood

at attention. McNeil and Marnette managed to sit up in the second wagon. They got a salute from the old man, who had been a major-general in the Civil War, and it was the proudest moment in McNeil's life when by great effort he managed to return it. Molly was on horseback. The soldiers grinned at her. They would not cheer, but their appreciation was evident. Bridget McNeil sat in the front seat of the ambulance. The men knew that Mrs. Compton was there. And so between bared heads and uplifted hearts the little band, followed by the troopers of Calmore, filed through the gates.

"You will let me see my husband right away?" Mrs. Compton had made the doctor promise.

"Instantly, my dear lady," said the surgeon. "It will be the best medicine for both of you."

"And, Bridget, you will bring the baby?"

"Thrust me for that, ma'am," said Bridget, proud of the confidence reposed in her and the hearty approval of the surgeon and the rest for the way she had discharged her duties and faced her responsibilities.

The eager, young lieutenants manned the stretcher on which Marion Compton was to be put. The whole regiment was clamorous to carry her, but Calmore and his own officers of Compton's own squadron claimed the privilege. Very tenderly they got Mrs. Compton on the stretcher, the whole regiment looking sympathetically on, they drew her out of the ambulance and carried her into the hospital. The general had already sent word to Major Compton that his wife was safe and was coming. They brought her in carefully and laid her gently on a narrow bed placed close by her husband's in the private room he occupied.

The hands of husband and wife met, and all the power of great passion and absorbing devotion could only express itself in feeble pressure.

"Jack," said the woman, "thank God I am here!"

"Indeed," said Compton, "if it had not been for Him I am sure neither of us would be here."

"I'm thinkin', sor," said Bridget, entering the room at the same time, "that here's an-

other one that you'd ought to be thankful to God for."

"And to you, Bridget," whispered Mrs. Compton, as the faithful Irishwoman uncovered her bundle and laid the little baby on Marion Compton's arm, where her husband could look at her by turning his head.

And that is the way the baby came.

BOOK TWO

HOW THEY NEARLY LOST HER

XII

IN WHICH THE BABY GETS “ESCRUGED”

JUST five years had elapsed since the day Lieutenant-Colonel John H. Compton, United States Army, then only a major, had been brought desperately wounded to this very post, of which the mutations of the service had now placed him in command. It was therefore just five years since his brave, young wife, Marion, had joined the half-dead soldier in the hospital, while Bridget McNeil had introduced him for the first time to his daughter, born two days before on the trail amid incidents as terrible and heart-rending as they were exciting.

The baby, who had been christened Marion, after her mother, had just successfully negotiated her escape from the dining-room of her father's quarters at Fort Sullivan. The colonel had been exceedingly distraught and preoccupied during the meal. The old Civil War

general, who had held the command when Marion was born, had died, and the new colonel of the regiment was on detached service; the active command, therefore, of that splendid body of hard fighters and gallant horsemen, the Fourteenth Regular Cavalry, had devolved upon the youngest officer of his rank in the service; and with the command of the regiment came the command of the post.

Fort Sullivan was not much of a post. It was one of those many temporary little frontier forts with which the Western country was dotted. Originally it was designed for a garrison of three or four companies of infantry or a troop or two of cavalry, seeking to overawe and control vast expanses of territory, filled with roaming bands of savage Indians, not yet broken to the law and totally unable to realize the power of the United States from the petty manifestation of it they were accustomed to meet.

Fort Sullivan was situated among the foothills of the Big Horn Mountains. The enormous mass of snow-capped Cloud Peak was easily visible from the parade. The fort itself was nothing more than a rambling stock-

ade, in which were contained the officers' quarters, storehouses, and barracks for the men, and a watch tower. Adjoining the stockade was a less defensible enclosure, the corral, containing the cavalry stables and the yards for mules, wagons, and the other miscellaneous livestock and impedimenta of an army post.

The stockade was impregnable against anything but artillery; soldiers with fieldpieces could have knocked it to pieces in an hour, but against the Indians it would serve. Outside the post, extending for miles toward the mountain range, lay a broad expanse of rolling prairie. Near the post there was a grassy meadow, which was used as a cavalry drill ground, and whose proximity to the knoll, on which the stockade rose, together with the mountain brook to the left, had determined the location of the fort. To the northward beyond this open space the land, which ran to the foothills, began to be heavily wooded on the slopes of the approaches of the great range.

All through that long summer the county had been in a state of feverish unrest. The

Sioux and Cheyennes, temporarily quieted for a few years, had grown menacingly bold and reckless; they had gone on the warpath early in the spring, and were still out. The whole frontier was ablaze, settlers had been massacred, and where they had wives or daughters these had been made the victims of atrocities too frightful to dwell upon.

Every available soldier in the Northwest had been hurried into the field, except Compton and four troops at Fort Sullivan. They had been retained where they were as a sort of reserve to afford a rallying point in case of disaster. The four troops also had to guard an immense section of the country. The main trails to the front passed by the stockade; there had been many small brushes with the Indians while these cavalymen were escorting wagon trains to the next post across the range. The work was important—indeed, vitally necessary—but both the colonel and his men pined for a chance to take the field. There was no help for it, however, orders were orders and they had to remain at the post doing this escort duty, which was exciting enough and dangerous, too, heaven only knows.

Colonel Compton had enjoyed his full share of field work in years gone by, anyway, and perhaps the authorities thought he ought to be well satisfied with his present duty.

Marion Compton, while she sympathized outwardly with her husband's disappointment at his comparative inaction, rejoiced in her heart that he was spared the dangers of the field. She was very contented that summer save for the constant apprehension that some other detachment would be ordered to garrison Fort Sullivan and the fresh men of the first squadron of the Fourteenth Cavalry would have to take the field. That was certain to come about sooner or later she and everybody else knew, meanwhile she would enjoy the day.

She was not the only woman at the post. Two or three of the officers were married, and there were twice as many children there, so little Miss Marion Compton did not lack youthful companionship. Then, too, there were a number of married non-commissioned officers stationed at the post. There were also a number of maids, mostly pretty, young Irish or German girls, who found life at such a post,

surrounded as they were by two hundred or more gallant, dashing, young cavalrymen, rather delightful.

The colonel's wife's maid was a jewel. Molly McNeil had developed into as pretty a girl as the proverbial Irish colleen of the story-book. Her hair was black, her eyes were blue, her skin was fair. As a maid she was a veritable treasure; but had she been as incompetent as she was able, Mrs. Compton would have kept her, if for no other reason than that she was devoted heart and soul to little Marion, who reciprocated the passion she inspired so completely that the young mother sometimes had to fight down a more than passing pang of jealousy.

Sergeant McNeil had never so far recovered from his wounds as to be again fit for active service. With a medal of honor and a pension, he had been given a well-earned retirement. The happiest hour of the old sergeant's active and adventurous life had been that on which he actually enjoyed the distinguished honor of reviewing the regiment, old General Allenby in personal command and giving him the salute, to which his long serv-

ice, his merits, and his gallant conduct entitled him.

Thereafter a place as watchman in a Chicago bank had been found for him, and he had gone East to accept it, taking with him his faithful wife, Bridget. Molly had remained with the Comptons as little Marion's nurse, and although often urged to give up work and come East and live with her father, now abundantly able to support her, she had always refused. She loved her charge whose whole life had been spent with her too much ever to leave her, she declared.

One could hardly describe Molly McNeil's devotion to Marion junior as whole-hearted, however, for the bright, young Irish girl, now just turned nineteen, also cherished a long-existent and growing admiration for Trooper Danny Meagher, one of the likeliest young men in B troop. Yet she would rather have died than allowed her preference to have become known to anybody, much less to the object of her affections.

In the first place, Molly was liked by all and loved by many, and she took an exquisite pleasure in being catholic in the distribution

of her favors. In the second place, she was having too good a time to resign, as yet, everything in favor of one man.

Danny Meagher himself, who was hopelessly in love with her, had no idea that he would eventually carry off the prize. He had kissed her without hesitation five years ago in the canyon, but now he could scarcely find courage enough to squeeze her hand on those rare occasions when she permitted him to hold it.

Meagher also had a medal of honor. Indeed, every survivor of the defence of the train at Big Meadows, in the canyon, had been granted the same coveted distinction, except, of course, Marnette, who was not in the service. Corporal Schmidt, that had been, was now first sergeant of B troop, and Danny Meagher would have won the chevrons of a sergeant also had he not been so incurably light-hearted, mischievous, and fond of fun. Colonel Compton had his eye on him, however, and when he steadied down his promotion was certain. Meagher was only twenty-four and apparently as much of a boy as when he made that mad dash through the night to bring rescue to Sergeant McNeil.

It so happened that B troop had been stationed elsewhere for the preceding three years. It had only rejoined the squadron at Fort Sullivan a few months before, so Danny, who had heretofore regarded Molly McNeil as a little girl, was greatly astonished at her development. He had immediately sought to establish himself once more on the old footing, but the young woman was not so minded. Or, if she was, she cleverly concealed her wishes and led Meagher a merry chase along with the rest.

Molly was as flirtatious as she was pretty, and the other young women of that jolly but humble social circle, of which she was the leader, followed her example. Colonel Compton used to declare whimsically that he had more trouble between the men and the women together than he would have had of an army of either separately.

Molly's heart was a big one, however; indeed, it seemed sometimes to the keenly observant and not a little amused officers that it was large enough to take in the whole regiment, and baby Marion enjoyed a share entirely disproportionate to her own small per-

son. All the men adored the baby, though they were madly jealous, especially Meagher, of every caress Molly lavished upon her.

Colonel Compton had been distrait and irresponsible to his little daughter's advances at dinner that late autumn day because he had received tidings of the burning of a settlement a few miles from the post by a larger and more formidable war party of Indians than had hitherto ventured near the fort. He had promptly dispatched Calmore, one of his best captains, with his troop to the destroyed settlement, praying that some of the settlers might have escaped and the succor might be valuable, and hoping also that the arrival of the cavalry might possibly save other outlying settlements, or, at least, give the ranchers and their families opportunity to get to the post under a safe escort.

This troop had been gone a day and a half, and nothing had been heard from it, which was very disquieting. Whether to wait any longer or to order out another troop to seek for it or to go with heavier force were problems which weighed upon him deeply. Contrary to his usual habit, he had paid no atten-

tion to Miss Marion's lively prattle. He answered her monosyllabically and at random. The young lady was not used to being so disdainfully treated and she resented it in her own fashion by bursting into a sudden roar of weeping.

"What the——" exclaimed the colonel, catching himself just in time as his wife interrupted with uplifted hands.

"My dear!"

"What's the matter with you, baby?" he asked.

There was no answer. When she got started Marion could outmatch the capacity of Bottom the Weaver, who boasted his qualifications for playing the lion's part. Like the immortal Athenian, she demonstrated that she could do it extempore, too, since it was nothing but roaring.

"Marion, what do you want?" at last insisted Colonel Compton firmly.

"I dess want to be escrugged," Miss Marion at last managed to choke out between her vociferous sobs.

"Well, in heaven's name, 'escruge' her, Marion," said Compton to his wife. "I've got

troubles enough without having this child on my nerves in this way."

"Molly," said Mrs. Compton with dignity, "take Miss Marion out."

"I don't want to do in de kitchen wiv Molly," roared the little lady.

"Well, take her anywhere—out on the parade ground or any old place," said the distracted officer.

Molly, shooting a rather indignant glance at him—for had he not been harsh to her darling?—looked to Mrs. Compton for confirmation. She took her orders from the mistress, not the master.

"Yes, take her out on the parade, the colonel is very much troubled to-day," she said.

Molly nodded. She hadn't lived at the post a year without comprehending some of the troubles of the commanding officer, and eke the commanding officer's wife. So she gently bundled the small miss in her arms, and the two made their escape.

"What is it that troubles you, John?" asked his wife, coming around the table and sitting down by his side.

"The old situation, my dear," he replied. "Not hearing from Calmore, coupled with the fact that the Indians had the audacity to raid that settlement so near us. Their numbers, too, according to the report of old Marnette, who brought the news of the attack, are considerable. We had no reason to expect anything of this kind, and it looks as though the troops to the westward had been defeated or outgeneraled, else the Sioux couldn't be in such strong force hereabouts."

"Are there many of them?"

"There must have been three hundred in that war party. You know Marnette is a most reliable man——"

"He went back with Captain Calmore, didn't he?"

"Yes, and his presence with that force makes me a little less anxious. Calmore is a splendid officer, but Marnette knows more about Indians and Indian fighting than any man on the frontier, and he loves it, too."

"I wonder why he didn't go to the front with General Crook or——"

"Well, Marnette is getting old, and he's mighty fond of a young woman not far from

here with whom I, too, am mightily smitten," was the fond reply.

"Nonsense, John," said Marion Compton, looking greatly pleased, nevertheless.

"And Marnette has told me that he rather expected that all we'd have to do to get in the fighting is to sit tight and wait until it came to us. I laughed at the idea at first, but I begin to believe he is right now. Well, I must go into the office and——"

"Don't go right away, John," said his wife. "Stay with me a little while. I'll let the table wait for Molly. Come, we'll go into the parlor and I'll play for you. You look so tired and worried. I can't bear to see that expression on your face."

"And what would my command say if they knew that when I ought to be about my business, I was listening to you at the piano?"

"Well, they would probably say they wished they were where you were if they got a chance," answered his beautiful young wife brightly.

"And well they might," returned Colonel Compton. He looked at his watch. "I can spare you a half hour."

"Spare me!" smiled the girl brightly. She was still not much more than a girl, although many years a wife and five years a mother.

"Spare myself, then, you little witch."

And although she was rather a substantial "little witch," he picked her up lightly in his big, strong arms and carried her into the room adjoining the dining-room. Like every other frontier room, it was bare and sparsely furnished; the only piano in the territory, it was believed, had lodgment there, and the whole garrison rejoiced thereat.

Presently the music of Marion Compton's clear, sweet soprano floated out into the room, and a little later Compton himself joined in some old song in a creditable tenor voice. The half hour was soon gone, and something more besides. For a little time Compton had forgotten his responsibilities and cares. The orderly, who opened the door, having knocked once or twice without arousing attention, thought they made a very pretty picture: the woman at the piano, the colonel standing back of her, his arm resting lightly and tenderly on her shoulder. It was a pity to disturb them, but he had news that could not wait.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said sharply.

Compton wheeled on his heel on the instant and looked at him, frowning.

"I knocked several times, sir, but could not make you hear," exclaimed the orderly quickly.

"Oh," returned Compton, "I understand."

"The officer of the guard reports that there are Indians on the hills to the westward."

"John!" cried Mrs. Compton, as he turned, snatched a hasty kiss, grabbed his cap, and followed by the orderly, fairly ran from the room.

In one corner of the post a tall watch tower of logs had been built. Compton broke into a run as he stepped off the low porch in front of his quarters. He crossed the parade on the double-quick, and sprang up the rude stairs of the watch tower with the agility of a light-footed boy.

Hadden, now one of the younger first lieutenants, who was the officer of the guard, was already there with the sergeant of the guard, Schmidt, the survivor of the defence of the train, and a veteran of many campaigns in the old country, whence he came.

"Where are they?" asked the colonel quickly.

The officer lowered his field glasses and pointed across the meadow to the hill.

"There, sir," he cried, proffering the binoculars to the colonel.

"Sioux und Cheyennes," growled old Schmidt.

He had seen them often in the field and recognized them, even with his naked eye.

"By George!" exclaimed Compton, after a quick stare through Hadden's field glasses, "you are right. Where can Calmore be?"

"He should have been back long ago, sir," ventured Hadden.

"Yes. Sergeant of the guard!"

"Yes, sir," answered Schmidt, saluting.

"Have the trumpeter sound 'boots and saddles.' Let the men get their horses in a hurry. Mr. Hadden, tell the adjutant to see that every man has all the ammunition he can carry."

"Very good, sir," cried old Schmidt, turning and plodding down the stairs.

The next moment the blare of a bugle was heard throughout the enclosure. Hadden had turned to follow the sergeant to carry out the

orders he had received with reference to the adjutant, but ere he could leave Compton caught him by the shoulder; he dropped the field glasses to the floor with a crash as he did so.

“My God, Hadden!” he cried. “Look there!”

XIII

WHEREIN LITTLE MISS MARION IS TAKEN BY THE ENEMY.

THE colonel's face was as white as a sheet. Hadden stared at him in amazement, not comprehending.

“There, there,” cried Compton, fairly shaking with emotion.

Away off near the farther end, evidently just having come out from the trees to the northward, Hadden made out a tiny little figure toiling through the tall grass. He recognized it at once.

“The baby!” he exclaimed. “What is she doing there?”

“I don't know. Look yonder.”

The Indians, too, had caught sight of the little figure. A number of them detached themselves from the mass on the hills and galloped down the slope to the eastward that led toward the meadow and the post. Compton was paralyzed with horror.

"I'll get her," cried Hadden.

He threw himself down the stairs. Some of the more alert of the men were already assembling on the parade, when Hadden burst into the midst of them.

"A horse—a horse!" he cried.

He seized the bridle of the nearest one.

"Everybody that is armed and mounted follow me," roared the officer. "Open the main gate."

The troopers of the guard, being dismounted, had not realized what had happened, for no one could see over the stockade. They knew that something serious was up, and lost no time in mounting and obeying the lieutenant's orders. Throwing open the main gate the lieutenant, followed by a score of soldiers, dashed through it.

Hadden was a superb horseman, and he happened to have got a good horse. He had the lead, too. He knew just what he wanted, the others had to find that out. They had followed blindly with the courage that the American soldier always manifests when his officer leads him, and it was not until they opened out on the meadow that they saw what they

were after. The colonel's daughter was the pet and the pride of the regiment. Every man in it loved her and she loved them all in turn. She was utterly unconscious of her peril, but they realized it and rode madly toward her.

Little Marion raised her head presently, and saw the Indians, who were much nearer to her than the soldiers. They did not frighten her, for she was an intrepid child and had always been thrown with men. Like her father and her mother, she was absolutely fearless, she had seen Indians before, and the bright plumes of the magnificent war bonnets of the Sioux and Cheyennes interested and pleased her greatly. She waved her hand at them in a childish glee. She did not see the troops racing furiously on, gritting out curses and prayers as they pushed forward, sparing neither their horses nor themselves in their endeavor.

It was a hopeless attempt from the first. The Indians had too great a start and there must have been two hundred and fifty of them riding toward the baby. Yet Hadden and the twenty heroes raced on. They were not the only persons in the drama, for a trooper on

foot, his face deathly white, suddenly appeared back of the galloping squadron, racing like them in their wake. The speed with which he went was amazing; but of course he could not keep up, or overtake the men on horses, but he made a gallant run for the baby. It was trooper Danny Meagher of the guard!

Back in the fort pandemonium was let loose. Compton turned and called over the parapet of the tower.

“For God’s sake make haste and get your companies out, gentlemen, my little daughter is there in the meadow, and——”

Never in the history of the regiment were three troops of cavalry mounted and moved out so quickly. With frantic haste the men saddled their horses and fell in line. Dexter, senior captain present, raised his sword two minutes after Hadden had burst out, and cried,

“All ready, sir.”

“Go,” said Compton, “get the child if you can, but don’t bring on a general action. Stand by for signals from the post. Don’t leave the meadow.”

He was a soldier, this colonel; and he realized that although his child’s life might be for-



SHE WAVED HER HAND AT THEM IN CHILDISH GLEE

feit, there were other women and children there and gallant men whose lives could not be thrown away. By this time two women panted up the stairs, Mrs. Compton and Molly.

"John," cried the wife, who had heard, "is Marion out there?"

"Yes, God help us."

"Will they get her?"

Colonel Compton took his wife by the hand.

"I am afraid so. Look!"

The woman strained her eyes out over the prairie. By this time the Indians were fearfully near, yet Hadden and his men were going like a hurricane, and far in the rear panted that desperate runner. Immediately before and below the gate the three troops, Dexter in the lead, debouched from column into line and joined in the great race.

But it was soon over. The leading Indian was upon the child. He leaned down in front of his horse, swept her up and held her high in the air, and as he did so pealed out a terrible war cry. The next instant the spitting of rifles crackled over the plain, the first shot coming from the lone runner. He stopped short in his tracks and emptied his carbine

into the Indians who had circled about following their leader, and were now galloping back across the meadow and up the hill.

The range was short the target was large, and there were half a dozen empty horses among the Indians, especially as Hadden's men poured in a close volley on them. The Indians themselves made a quick return. They were going fast and were execrable marksmen, however, so only three of Hadden's men were hit. Hadden himself received a scratch on the cheek, one man was killed, and another had his arm broken by a bullet.

With despair in his heart, the young lieutenant checked his pursuit. He had made a gallant ride, but he had been too late. With twenty men he could not cope with the two hundred and fifty Indians in the advance; he might have attacked them, nevertheless, for he was a reckless youngster and his blood was up, but they would immediately be supported by the other savages in great numbers on the hill. It was not to be thought of.

By this time Hadden was joined by Dexter, raising the total force to two hundred. The odds were still impossible.

“Let’s ride through the whole damned bunch, cap’n,” cried one of the men, “and git back the babby.”

Dexter hesitated.

“I’d like nothing better than to do it,” he answered, “but it would be a hopeless task, I fear. Still——”

And at that instant, faint and far from the tower, came the bugle blowing the recall. That settled it.

Compton, standing there alone with his wife at his feet in a dead faint and Molly bending over her, had seen it all. He knew that if he gave the signal those gallant men would try to ride through the whole Cheyenne tribe, but it would be throwing away their lives, and he decided instantly against it.

But before the men out in the meadow could obey the recall, indeed they had become so scattered in their wild ride that it took some little time to get them into orderly ranks again, there was a sudden burst of rifle firing far to the left, behind an unusually steep hill near which the river ran and around which the trail entered the valley. Dexter was a good

soldier and knew the situation as well as Compton. Everybody knew it, in fact.

“That’ll be Calmore and hard pressed,” he said to the other captains; “we must relieve him.”

“Certainly,” was the quick answer as they noticed the Indians to the front galloping toward the pass.

“I’ll disregard the recall,” said Dexter in quick decision.

He rode out a little in advance of the three troops, and lifted his sword to the figure he could see standing on the tower.

Compton had heard the firing, he had seen the smoke, he had a better view than the troopers in the field. He waved his hand at Dexter and the next moment ordered a bugle to be sounded, which gave him the needed permission.

“Forward!” cried the veteran captain exultantly.

The squadron moved off at a gallop up the meadow toward the pass behind the hill. They got there just in time. Calmore with a dozen wagons containing wounded settlers and their women and children was fighting desperately

with the Sioux and Cheyennes circling around him, furiously pouring in a withering fire. Dexter did not wait a second. He fell like a storm on the flank of the Indians, fighting them back; indeed that was easy, for they invariably gave way before an impetuous, dashing charge. Dexter kept his men well in hand and it was not long before the way was cleared. Calmore, who did not need any instructions, urged his wagons in Dexter's rear and then ordered his tired men up on Dexter's right. The whole body fell back skirmishing, hard pressed by the Indians, who, although they outnumbered the soldiers five to one, did not venture to come to hand-to-hand death grips with them.

Dexter handled his squadron with masterly skill and they presently reached the fort, one or two having been killed and a few more wounded. Compton and the few men left in the fort with the women and children met them at the gate.

"You didn't bring back my baby?" cried the desperate mother, as the excited soldiers filed through and formed line on the little parade.

"Mrs. Compton," said Dexter, throwing himself from his horse, "I wish I had been in her place, ma'am."

"And you, too, failed, Mr. Hadden?"

"Madam," said the young lieutenant, "I would cheerfully have given my life for hers. I rode the best I knew how, but they had too great a start over us."

"Did they kill her?" asked Compton hoarsely.

"I don't believe so," answered Calmore. "I saw her alive in the arms of a chief just before Dexter attacked them."

"Were you all saved, Calmore?"

"Three men were killed, sir, and seven wounded," answered Calmore, "but we brought off a score or more of women and children besides some wounded settlers. That's Dull Knife out there with all the Cheyennes. If it hadn't been for our dash for the settlement every woman and baby we've got in the wagon would have been gone. The whole Sioux nation is out, too. I am awfully sorry to hear about the baby, Mrs. Compton," continued Calmore. "I couldn't love her more if she was my own," he added, thinking of the

day he had heard that baby's voice for the first time five years before.

"Now that you are all safe, I want to know how she got out," asked Compton sternly. It was the first opportunity he had had to investigate the affair. "Sergeant of the guard?"

"Yes, sir," said Schmidt.

"Do you know anything about this?"

Then a white-faced man of the fort stepped from the ranks of the guard and saluted.

"'Tis me own fault, sor."

"Meagher!" cried Compton.

"If the colonel pleases, I was on guard an' the little gate was opened as it always is, an' my attention was dishtraced elsewhere an' the child got out an' we didn't know it until Leftenant Hadden burst through the main gate, sor."

"What distracted you?" thundered Compton.

"'Twas me, sor," said Molly McNeil, bravely assuming her part of the responsibility. "'Twas me that tempted the bhoy. Oh, the evil day that I was born, sor."

The colonel's eyes flashed, the color mounted

in his bronze face, his lips set. He was furiously angered and controlled himself with difficulty.

"Officer of the guard, put that man in the guardhouse!" he cried. "Desertion of his post of duty in time of war, is the charge. It is punishable with death. Mr. Severance!"

"Here, sir," answered the adjutant.

"Make out a detail for a court to convene in the morning to try Trooper Meagher for deserting his post."

"Oh, for the love of hiven!" wailed Molly.

" 'Tis my fault, 'tis mine entirely."

She threw herself at the colonel's feet and extended her arms.

"Out of my way," said Compton, harshly turning aside.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I want you all at my quarters. Come, Marion," he took his wife by the hand, he put his arm around her before them all, and half led and half carried her across the parade.

A low growl like thunder rose from the men, then finally one of them, a little bolder than the rest, voiced the demand.

"Colonel Compton, give us leave, sir, we'll

go out an' clean up the whole Cheyenne tribe to git back the girl."

"For de honor of de regiment," added old Schmidt, "Joust give us a chance."

"Aye," cried the first sergeant of A troop, "give us a chance to wipe out the disgrace that has been brought upon us all, by that coward yonder. It is a shame he is to the Irish an' to the regiment an' to the Army."

There was an instant surge toward poor Danny, who stood disarmed and helpless in the grasp of the troopers who had arrested him.

"You're right, me bhoys," he cried. "I deserve it all. Kill me, I'll welcome the bullet."

But Calmore, Dexter, Hadden, and the rest of the officers threw themselves to the front.

"Get back in ranks there," roared Calmore furiously, his soldierly instincts outraged by their mob-like movements. "What do you mean?"

"Ask the colonel to let us go out at 'em, sir," the old sergeant-major rather demanded than requested.

"You hear, Colonel Compton," cried Calmore.

For a moment the colonel hesitated.

"John," cried his wife imploringly, "let them go, they may save her."

"No," said Compton decisively, "it is not in the power of men. There are too many Cheyennes out there. I am responsible for these men, for these women and children in this post. I can't throw the lives of these men away uselessly. She's my daughter, but—Remember there are other mothers here, Marion.—I appreciate your spirit, men, I'd like nothing better than to lead you on such a charge, but it can't be. Captain Calmore!"

"Yes, sir."

"Dismiss the squadron, detail one troop for guard, and then meet me in my quarters at once with all the officers who can be spared; we must determine on our course of action."

CHAPTER XIV

DISCLOSES HOW THE WILY DULL KNIFE OFFERED AN EXCHANGE

IN view of the overwhelming numbers of the Indians on the hills, the informal council of war at the colonel's quarters decided, that nothing on earth could be done to rescue the baby. There was not a single officer, or a trooper, for that matter, who would not gladly have periled his own life for the child. But the officers were placed in positions of public trust, the post was crowded with refugees, its maintenance was necessary for the safety of the trail and the keeping open of the supply route to the front. Fort Sullivan was the only place of refuge, and the only protection as well, of a vast area of country.

The colonel and officers realized that he had no right to jeopardize these great issues for the life of one little baby, however precious she might be to him. One or two of the junior

officers did, indeed, advocate a bold dash at the Indian encampment, but the votes of the older and more experienced captains were unanimously against it. And by these votes they showed their high qualities, for Marion Compton, a piteous picture of silent appeal, sat in a corner of the room listening to this discussion, which would determine the fate of her daughter. There were elements of heroism in her composition as well, for she gave vent to no outcry, she broke into no wild and passionate entreaties. She sat as still and as rigid as the mountain range, her white face stony with horror and grief, her heart like lead in her breast, listening to the verdict of these brave, gallant, heroic men.

When all had spoken, Compton, with one pitying glance at his wife, confirmed the view of the majority.

“Gentlemen, you have decided rightly,” he said. “To attempt, with our force, to ride through those Indians would be madness. There are women and other children here, God bless them—our first duty is to them. The post must be defended at all hazards, we can’t spare a man.”

"Let me go alone, sir," pleaded Hadden.
"I can't stand it to see your wife——"

The lieutenant choked up and could not finish. The colonel shook his head.

"You are too good an officer to be thrown away, Hadden, and you don't know this Indian game. If Marnette were here now—by the way, where is Marnette, Captain Calmore?"

"Why," exclaimed Calmore in great surprise, "didn't he come in with us?"

"I didn't see him," answered Compton.
"Did any of you gentlemen?"

"I was the last man in the gate," said Dexter. "I saw every one in ahead of me, and I am certain that Marnette was not there."

Calmore struck his hand on the table. "I wouldn't have had anything happen to him for the world," he exclaimed. "We had a running fight for two days, and I don't hesitate to say that if it hadn't been for his skill and resourcefulness we should have been wiped out."

"How on earth was he left behind! That old trapper has served both me and mine in days gone by," returned the colonel feel-

ingly, "and I value and esteem him more than any of you can. Don't take any blame to yourself, Captain Calmore. In a running fight like that it would have been impossible to watch every man, besides I have confidence that if he did not come in it was because he wanted to stay out. Gentlemen, his absence gives me a ray of hope."

"Oh," cried Mrs. Compton, "do you think——"

"I don't think anything, my dear, I only hope, a little."

"Mrs. Compton," said Captain Dexter, "with the colonel's permission, you surely know how we feel? There isn't a one of us who wouldn't try anything to get the baby back."

"I know," faltered Mrs. Compton, "that you are as brave and devoted a set of officers and men as any on earth. I know as well as you that nothing can be done for my baby now. Her fate is in the hands of God."

"Yes," returned Calmore, a veteran of many a hard campaign and desperate fight, "I know these Indians well; there is more than a chance, I think, that they won't do her any

harm; being a baby they may adopt her into their tribe. Of course if she were older——”

“My judgment agrees with that of Captain Calmore,” said Dexter. “I don’t consider the case as absolutely desperate.”

“I pray not,” returned the woman. “But whether it be or not, we can do nothing.”

“Certainly nothing now,” said Emmett, another troop commander, “but by —— if we can get the regiment together we’ll ride through the whole Cheyenne tribe, sword in hand, and rescue her or——”

“Gentlemen,” said Compton, “I have been proud of my command, never more proud than at this moment of bereavement. Now we must counsel together about the defence of the post. It may be that they won’t attack us. They have shown extraordinary boldness in approaching so far and I fear it may have gone hard with the troops at the front, else how could they be here in such force, so many miles in their rear?”

At that moment the door opening on the porch was thrown open, an orderly from the guard appeared in the entrance.

“The officer of the guard directs me to re-

port to the commanding officer," he said, saluting, "that a flag of truce from the Indians is outside in the meadow, sir."

It was one of the conditions of this savage warfare, that the white men were bound to respect the conventions and habits of civilization. A flag of truce must be received, although the Indians themselves would not have paid the least attention to a similar advance on the part of the soldiers.

"Come, gentlemen, all," said Compton, rising and buckling his sword around him, "we have no secrets, and we'll see what they want."

Followed by the other officers the colonel repaired to the main gate. Old Sergeant Schmidt reported that three Indians had ridden up, one of them carrying a dirty white rag on the end of a lance, and they had been halted by command some thirty yards away from the gate. By the colonel's direction the wicket by the side of the main gate was opened, and Compton, attended by Calmore and Hadden, stepped out, the other officers mounting to the tower by the officer of the guard. The three Indians sat their horses impassive as

statues, Compton, revolver in hand, stepped forward a few paces and said:

“What do you want?”

“Me got letter,” said the leading Indian, a magnificent specimen of Cheyenne manhood with a gorgeous war bonnet on his head.

“Give it here,” said the colonel.

“You no fire?”

“No.”

It was a tribute to the honor of the white man that the Indian recognized that no further assurance was necessary. He kicked his pony in the ribs and spoke a word, the animal slowly trotted over to the three dismounted officers. Calmore and Hadden kept him well covered with their revolvers. The Indian rode up with utmost unconcern and halted within reaching distance of Compton. He handed him a dirty, greasy scrap of paper. It read this way:

“Dull Knife got big white chief's pappoose, he give back, you give fort. You no give fort, he kill baby.”

The writing—that of some half-breed—was as ignorant as the paper was dirty, but the purport of the message was unequivocal and

not to be misunderstood. The Indians offered to exchange the baby for the post. The proposition could not be entertained for a moment, of course, and the colonel did not even hesitate.

“No,” answered Compton promptly.

“You no give?” queried the Indian.

Compton shook his head.

“Look,” said the chief, turning in his saddle and pointing back to the hill on which the warriors were clustered. As he spoke, as if in obedience to the gesture he made, a gigantic Indian separated himself from the balance and raced down the slope; he stopped just out of rifle shot and held the baby up in his hand, with the other he brandished a knife whose bright blade reflected the afternoon sunlight.

“I will not give up the fort to anybody,” said Compton sternly, “but I charge you to tell Dull Knife that if he hurts one hair of that baby’s head, as there is a God above me I will make the Cheyenne tribe pay with a life for every drop of blood that’s shed. And when I capture him I’ll hang him for murder. He knows what this regiment can do. Bid him remember Big Meadows five years ago.”

How much of this the chief understood could not be known, for it was Calmore who asked:

"Is it Dull Knife's band, the same that we defeated in the canyon when Marion was born?"

"Yes."

"Is he proposing that we give up the post for the child?"

"Yes," answered Compton.

The chief grunted, pointed from the child to the stockade as if for the illumination of Calmore.

"And I have told him that we cannot entertain the proposition."

"God, but it's hard," said Calmore grimly.

Hadden could no longer control himself. He stepped closer to the chief and shoved his revolver at the man's head.

"You murderous dog," he said furiously, "I don't know what stops me from pulling the trigger."

"Respect the flag, Mr. Hadden," cried Compton. "Get back," he flung out his arm toward the chief, "and give them my message. We won't give up the fort, and if you hurt the child you'll pay."

“White chief big fool,” said the Indian, turning his back on the group and trotting away to his comrades.

“Won’t you let me plug him, Colonel?” cried Hadden, nervously fingering his revolver.

“It can’t be,” said the colonel. “Come, gentlemen.”

In a few moments they were in the fort again. A few words put the officers in possession of the proposition which the colonel had so unhesitatingly rejected. Some of the men heard it, too, and at once communicated it to the others. The little fort was a seething mass of passion. Dispositions to repel the expected attack and to hold the position were quickly made. The number of the Indians seemed to be increasing. It was the heaviest war party that the Cheyennes had ever sent afield. Experienced men estimated that there were at least a thousand warriors there. They were evidently making camp, for they made no move to attack the post; on the contrary, as night approached, fires were kindled here and there on the hills and other preparations made for the passing of night.

Whether they would eventually attack the post or not, no one could say, but Compton did not expect any trouble during the night, although the guards were warned not to relax their vigilance and watchfulness on that account.

After seeing everything in readiness, the colonel summoned Calmore and Dexter, the two officers upon whom he placed most reliance, to his quarters once more. Again it had been impossible to keep secret the Indian offer of exchange and Mrs. Compton was aware of it. She would not have been a mother if her heart had not yearned toward acceptance, but, like her husband, she knew that was impossible. She was a soldier's wife and she schooled herself to take up again the ordinary duties of life, which, though they sometimes are frightfully hard, yet after all frequently save the breaking mind.

Supper was on the table when the colonel and the two officers entered the room, and Mrs. Compton bade them partake of what she had provided.

"I have had to get it myself, John," she apologized, wearily and heart-brokenly.

"Molly is in a state of absolute and utter collapse, poor girl, not only over the baby"—she bit her lips and fought down the choking sensation in her throat—"but because it was her foolish flirting with Meagher that caused him to neglect his duty and made them both forget the baby, who evidently slipped through the wicket gate unnoticed. It was ajar at the time, so far as I can learn."

"Meagher deserves all that is coming to him," said Calmore, a grim old bachelor, who had little sympathy for woman's wiles apparently.

"Yes, but all the same, I am sorry for him," returned Dexter. "He was one of the best troopers in the regiment."

"And we can never forget what he did when Marion was born," said Mrs. Compton.

"That does not excuse him for his conduct," returned the colonel.

"Molly says it is all her fault," urged the wife.

"But Meagher will have to take the punishment just the same," returned Compton, dereliction of duty being the one thing he could not pardon.

"Molly says they will shoot him, but that is not possible, is it?" asked Mrs. Compton.

"It is more than possible," returned her husband briefly. "Desertion of his post in time of war."

"But this isn't war exactly," pleaded the woman.

"Is it not?" returned the colonel. "You will see before we get through with that crowd yonder."

"And is he likely to be shot?"

"He ought to be," returned Dexter bitterly, "if for no other reason than the old law—a life for a life. That little baby is worth a thousand soldiers who desert their posts."

"Poor Meagher," said the woman gently, choking back her tears. "It must be awfully hard on him, and he was so fond of Marion."

"Yes," repeated the colonel, "but that doesn't excuse him."

"It will kill Molly," pleaded his wife.

There was a tap on the door again. The orderly, being bidden, entered once more.

"The officer of the guard says that the prisoner, Trooper Meagher, would like to speak with the commanding officer."

“My compliments to Mr. Dalton,” returned Compton, “and tell him to send the prisoner to my quarters at once.”

“I wonder what he wants,” said Calmore, as the orderly departed.

“Wants to beg off, I suppose,” returned Dexter.

“No, I hardly think so,” said the colonel. “He isn’t the kind that will refuse to face the music and take his medicine.”

XV

IN WHICH TROOPER MEAGHER DESERTS TO THE ENEMY!

IN a few moments Meagher attended by a corporal's guard was marched into the colonel's room. His guards released him and stepped back, the colonel motioned them to remain in the room.

"Well," he said sternly.

Meagher moistened his lips and tried to speak, but could make no sound.

"Speak out," said the colonel. "What do you want?"

"If the colonel pleases," Meagher at last gasped out, "I——" he found great difficulty in continuing.

"You have not come to beg for mercy, have you?"

"No," returned the trooper, a little color coming to his face. "I acknowledge me fault, sor, an' 'tis all mine. You won't do anything to Molly, sor?"

"What can I do? She is a woman and——"

"It was me that tempted her, sor. I clane forgot meself——"

"There is no justification in that."

"I know it, sor, I know what I've done an' what I deserve. I know what the court martial will award me, I've got nothing to say ag'in' the justice of it. I'm ready to take me punishment like a man. I failed in me juty, sor, but the colonel knows I'm no coward, an' Captain Calmore knows it too, sor."

"Yes," said Calmore, thus appealed to, "I know it."

"You didn't come here to tell us that, I take it," said the colonel. "I know what you've done for us in the past. You've been a brave soldier, but that can't save you now and——"

"I am comin' to it, sor. Next to Molly," said Trooper Danny, "I loved that babby of yours, which I was there when she was born, an' before I'm punished for me fault I'd like to git her away from the red devils yonder, if she's alive."

"Yes, we'd all like to do that," said Calmore coldly.

"Well, sor, I want to thry it, if the colonel plaíses."

"Try it!" exclaimed the colonel. "Are you mad?"

"Oh, listen to him," interposed Mrs. Compton, who had heard, in silence, all that had transpired. "He may be able to do something for her."

"Have you a plan?"

"I have, sor."

"What is it?"

"'Tis to escape this night an' pretend to Dull Knife an' his men that I'm a desarter, an' by that means to git into their camp an' then to take a chance at stealin' away with the young missy."

"Ninety-nine chances to a hundred you'd get shot before you could have speech with Dull Knife."

"Yes, no doubt, sor, but I'd be glad to take the wan chance for the sake of the child, if the colonel would let me. The court will probably condemn me to death anyway," pleaded Meagher, "an' why not lave me thry to be av use before I die; besides, sor, if I were kilt that way, it would save the record of the ould

regiment, which has never had a case like mine before."

The door from the dining-room was thrown suddenly open. Molly burst into the room and threw herself at the colonel's feet. She had been listening, small blame to her, and had heard everything.

"For the love of hiven," she cried, "don't lave him do it."

"And would you rather have him shot as a criminal by his comrades than take that kind of a chance?" asked the colonel coldly, for he had not much sympathy for Molly after her folly.

"I don't want him shot at all, at all, for I love him, an' I don't care who knows it," Molly cried boldly before them all.

"Molly, is it the truth you're sayin'?" asked Meagher, who could not keep the joy in his heart at that wild confession out of his face and voice.

"By all the saints it is," returned the woman. "I treated you shamefully—'tis my fault."

"Indeed 'tis not," protested Danny Meagher earnestly. "Does the colonel be-

lave me? I'm as good as a dead man, I wouldn't lie to him now."

"I don't believe you would," Compton admitted.

"An' I swear I don't want to pretend to desert to save me life. I want to save the child, an' I give the colonel an' the other officers present me word av honor that I'll come back if I live, whether I save the child or not, an' surrender meself a prisoner for trial. 'Tis only the word of a throoper, sor."

"The honor of a private soldier of the American Army should be as dear to him as that of any officer," returned Compton gravely.

"And it is, sor, thank your honor for them words," exclaimed Meagher.

"Oh, Danny, Danny," wailed the woman, "don't go!"

" 'Tis only the colonel's permission I am waitin' for, Molly darlin'," returned the man.

"What do you think, Calmore?" asked Compton.

"I don't think there is a chance in the world, but as far as I am concerned, I'd rather

have him shot by the Indians than do it ourselves, and it would in a way save the regimental record if he could escape. We have had proofs of Meagher's courage and address, you know."

"I agree with Captain Calmore," said Dexter in answer to an interrogative look from the colonel. "I believe that Meagher means what he says, and there is a bare chance that he can bring it off. I am in favor of letting him escape."

"Let him go, John," whispered Mrs. Compton, although no one had asked her opinion, which, nevertheless, had more weight than any other with her husband. "Perhaps he may bring my baby back."

"I'll bring that baby back to you, ma'am, or I'll die the death av a desarter, if the colonel will only lave me go," said Meagher.

The colonel relapsed into a brown study.

"Meagher," he said at last, "I am inclined to accede to your request."

"Hiven bless you, sor," answered Meagher, his face lightening.

"You give me your word of honor that, successful or not, you will surrender yourself for

trial again when opportunity arises and if you live, of course?"

"Me word av honor, sor, so help me God, the Blessed Virgin, an' all the saints."

"I take it," answered Compton briefly. "Now as to the details."

"The moon will be up in an hour, sor," returned Meagher. "I've thought it all out. I can git over the wall of the corral, slink along the stockade till I reach the meadow an' then make a dash for it. The men on guard will fire at me, the more av them the merrier, an' if I could git hit an' slightly wounded so as not to knock me out, it would be better, it would make them Injuns belave then that I was honest."

Molly McNeil completely gave way at this. She lay on the floor moaning feebly.

"My dear," said the colonel sharply to his wife, "if that woman doesn't stop whimpering I will have her taken out. Very well, Meagher, it shall be as you say. Corporal, you have heard all that passed?"

"Yes, sir," answered the corporal of the guard.

"And you, too, men?"

"Yes, sir," answered the squad, which had fetched the prisoner.

"Take the prisoner away, and send Mr. Dalton, the officer of the guard, and Sergeant Schmidt to me."

"Thank you, sor, an' God bless you," cried Meagher. "I'll do me best to show meself a man an' to bring you back the baby, ma'am, that I lost, bad cess to me."

"Oh, Danny, Danny," wailed Molly.

Meagher hesitated, made a step in the maid's direction, but at a gesture from the colonel he checked himself and started to follow his guards.

"Corporal," said the colonel, looking at the frantic but beseeching maid, "just let the prisoner step into the dining-room alone a moment. No, he won't run away now."

It was quite evident what the colonel gave the soldier that permission for and Molly struggled to her feet, followed after him, and closed the door behind her. The colonel's wife looked at him gratefully because of his thoughtful kindness.

"Mr. Dalton," said the colonel, as the officer of the guard accompanied by Sergeant

Schmidt entered the room, "I have decided to allow the prisoner, Meagher, to escape. He intends to desert to the Indians in the hope that he may be received by them, and find an opportunity to steal away my little daughter."

"Very good, sir," returned Dalton, surprised indeed, but too good an officer to show any emotion.

"You are to let him get over the corral wall near the stockade. He is to slink along the stockade until he gets to the meadow and then make a dash for it, the guard is to discover him and open fire upon him until he gets out of range. Care must be taken, however, not to hit him, and the firing must not be overdone. Let it be just what would occur if a prisoner were escaping. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Schmidt, you, too, comprehend?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, we must have no hitch about the attempt; it's a forlorn hope, but it seems to be our only chance."

"I will attend to it, sir."

"Very good, you can go."

The colonel himself now stepped to the door of the dining-room and called Meagher. The trooper tore himself away from Molly's arms and, without trusting himself for a backward look, followed the colonel. It was Mrs. Compton who went to the poor fainting foolish woman, who had got them all into such awful trouble.

The escape was effected just as it had been planned. The troopers on guard had received their orders. As soon as the form of the private was visible in the meadow in the moonlight, they opened fire. Meagher played his part to perfection, zigzagging as he ran with furious speed toward the Indians. The carbine fire from the stockade was tremendous; it filled the whole valley with noise, and awoke the Indians to instant attention. There was quick mounting of ponies and riding to the front. The moonlight made things plainly visible and the Indians soon realized that some one was running away from the fort.

Meagher of course was not hit, and in a short time he was out of range. He kept on running, however, while Compton and Dexter and Calmore watched him eagerly from the

watch tower. Just before he reached the foremost of the Indians something happened that was not in the program. From the woods off to the right came a sudden flash of light followed presently by the sharper crash of a heavy rifle. At the same time Meagher pitched forward and fell prone on the grass. He was immediately surrounded by Indians and they could not see what further became of him.

"He's killed!" exclaimed Compton in great dismay. "Who could have fired that shot? Our last hope is gone."

The three officers stood gloomily watching. They saw, or thought they saw, a figure hauled from the ground and laid across one of the horses, after which the Indians turned back to the hills. They were just turning to descend the tower when a man broke out of the woods and hailed the fort.

"Don't shoot," cried a voice they all recognized. "It's Marnette."

The colonel in an instant plunged down the stairs to the wicket gate and met the old scout.

"Wall, colonel," said Marnette cheerfully, "I plugged that deserter all right."

"Oh, Marnette," said Compton gravely, "I am afraid you have spoiled our only chance."

"How's that?" asked the scout quickly as he entered the post.

"That was Danny Meagher. It was all a scheme between us, he was to pretend to desert so as to get a chance to rescue my baby."

"Is that Mrs. Compton's babby I seed with the Indians?"

"Yes," answered the colonel.

"I'm mighty sorry I drawed a bead on him. I seen him break away an' I heard all the shootin' an' I nachur'ly thought you wanted to git him. I wouldn't have done it for the world. How did they ever git ahold of her?"

"You are not to blame and it cannot be helped," answered Compton, after briefly explaining the circumstances. "It almost seems as if every sort of luck were against us."

"Tain't so bad as that," answered Marnette gravely, yet with a certain reassuring cheerfulness and confidence. "I know them Injuns well, I think there ain't no one in this country that knows 'em better; they won't do no hurt to the babby, they'll likely adopt her

into the tribe, thinkin' to save her for some chief's squaw when she grows up, colonel. But we'll git her long afore that. I didn't come in with Cap'n Calmore this afternoon, because I wanted to find out something about 'em. It is Dull Knife hisself. There's nigh onto a thousand of 'em. They seemed to have outgeneraled Crook an' Miles an' all the rest of the soldiers, there ain't been a battle so far as I can find out, but they left Crazy Horse and made a quick dash here, hopin' to find you off your guard at the post and seize it an' then make a quick gitaway."

"Dull Knife sent me a letter written by some half-breed, offering to exchange the baby for the post, and saying they would kill her if I didn't accede to his demand."

"It's jest a bluff, colonel," said Marnette. "Now, with your permission,—I had to turn my pony loose in the woods yonder—after I git a little rest an' somethin' to eat an' drink, I'm goin' to git some young soldier here to go with me an' git away south an' east until I strike a telegraph station an' git help for you, unless you've got a better plan, for they're goin' to attack you in the morning."

"Let me go with him, sir," said Hadden.

"Well, Mr. Hadden," said Marnette, shrewdly sizing up the young officer, with whom he had maintained an acquaintance, since the day he met him first at the Big Meadows, "if the colonel sez so, I'd about as soon have you for trail mate an' fightin' mate as anybody in this yere post."

"Thank you, Marnette," said Hadden.

"Take Hadden if you wish," said Compton, "although he is one of my best officers and I can hardly spare him."

"We'll be back afore the fightin' is over," said Marnette.

"And now, if you will go over to my quarters you will find something to eat there."

"And I want to say a word to hearten up Mrs. Compton," answered the old scout. "Why, I love that babby as if 'twas my own; I was there when your lady borned her an' I'm goin' to be here when she is brung back to her mother."

XVI

IN WHICH THE OLD REGIMENT MARCHES AWAY TO HUNT FOR THE BABY

MARNETTE and Hadden got away safely that night. As Marnette had anticipated, the Indians attacked the post early the next morning. Short of an escalade they tried every other possible way to capture it, managing even to set fire to it, but their efforts availed them nothing. The soldiers easily drove them back, killing many of them. They had not a chance on earth to succeed with the tactics they employed, and as water and provisions abounded in the stockade, the garrison suffered no special hardship; in short, had it not been for the loss of the baby the whole affair would have been rather enjoyable than otherwise for the soldiers.

That fact, however, preyed on the whole garrison. There never was a body of soldiers

who longed more earnestly to go out in the open and grapple with their red besiegers than they. The Indians wanted that, too, their overwhelming numbers, their knowledge of the rough, broken, mountainous country, so well suited for ambush and surprise, so easily defensible, ensuring them an easy victory over so small a force. They could cut it to pieces. Therefore to entice the troops away from the post was what the Indians most particularly desired, they would have made mincemeat of the soldiers if they could have got them in the open, for they were better armed and practically as well mounted as the troopers. The cavalry horse was no better for service purposes in that country than the Indian pony, and the Cheyennes possessed a large number of remounts, which the soldiers did not have.

Again, the Winchester repeating rifle with which the braves were all armed was a more serviceable weapon than the cavalry carbine. Furthermore, the hills would have afforded abundant cover for the Indians and the small force of soldiers would have been caught in the defiles and exterminated. Dull Knife was one of Crazy Horse's best lieutenants, and in

many a campaign had shown his strategy and tactics. On that score he was a worthy antagonist for the very best commanders in the Army.

The Indians, who had not yet killed the baby, used her to irritate the soldiers. They displayed her just out of range where she could easily be seen by the garrison: sometimes they struck her, or appeared otherwise to maltreat her. Those were the things hardest to bear.

Marion Compton witnessed these evidences of savage barbarity, for the soldiers could not keep the wretched, heart-broken mother away from the tower short of taking her thence by force. Her feelings were harrowing to a degree, yet she got a certain kind of satisfaction from the evidence that the child was still alive.

After four days of this desultory siege, Marnette crept into the fort one night and brought the welcome news that Colonel Huntley, from the nearest post to the east, was coming up with a battalion of infantry and two troops of cavalry. The foot soldiers had been loaded into wagons and they were coming almost as fast as the mounted men.

Marnette transmitted to Colonel Compton a plan of attack formed by Colonel Huntley, by which it was arranged that the garrison of the fort, on a given signal, should make a demonstration in force, by a sortie, while he fell on the rear of the Indians. But the Indians were better served by their scouting parties than were the soldiers, and when Colonel Huntley's force arrived in the vicinity of the post early the next morning, they had broken camp and moved away to the northwest through the mountain passes.

The siege was thus raised, and with the departure of the Cheyennes the peril to that country was over. Riding over the place where the Indians had camped one of the soldiers found a little girl's shoe, which he brought back to Mrs. Compton. That was all that was left on the field of the child. In all these days nothing had been seen of Danny Meagher. The Indians had carried off the bodies of those who had been killed in the skirmishing. It was thought they might have scalped and left the remains of the soldier, but there was no sign of him anywhere. The colonel took some comfort in this. He be-

lieved that Meagher might be alive and possibly able to effect something, but Marnette privately held a contrary view; he had drawn a bead on the soldier, the shot had been easy, and he was not accustomed to missing his aim. He did not say anything about this, however; it would have been cruel to take away from the parents of the little girl the hope upon which they so much depended.

The newspaper men had accompanied Colonel Huntley; having soon learned the story of the baby it was promptly spread broadcast over the United States. Public opinion was greatly aroused, Colonel Compton's heroic resolution, in sacrificing his child to his duty as a soldier, meeting with instant commendation.

And the commanding officer of the Fourteenth having opportunely received the much coveted star of a brigadier-general, Compton found himself, while still a young man, left in command of the regiment, the new colonel being kept on staff duty, to the approval of every one.

Public opinion did more than approve. It clamored for a winter campaign against Dull

Knife, and for the annihilation of his band which had been guilty of other atrocious cruelties and maraudings. It had been the policy of the War Department hitherto to confine its expeditions to the open seasons, especially in the mountainous countries, and to place the troops in forts and cantonments during the winter. A different policy was to be followed now, and Colonel Compton's earnest request to take the field, backed as it was by an overwhelming public demand so soon as it was learned that his whole regiment was assembled at Fort Sullivan equipped for a winter campaign, was promptly granted. Again he was given an independent command, although he was the youngest lieutenant-colonel in the army, with orders to go where he would and to do what he might to run down Dull Knife, to find his child, rescue her if she were alive or to avenge her if she had been killed, by breaking up or bringing in the pestilential band.

It was a sad yet glorious day at Fort Sullivan, when the regiment, assembled for the first time in its history, ten troops each, fifty strong, marched away. It was a bright winter morn-

ing in December when they paraded for the last time in the meadow.

They broke ranks for a few brief and hurried moments of farewell, all too short, before the final assembly was sounded.

Poor Marion Compton clung to her gallant husband before the whole regiment, as the rest of the women did to those whom they loved.

"I will find her, darling," said the colonel reassuringly, "if she is on the face of the earth. Somewhere in those mountains Dull Knife is hidden for the winter. We will comb them until we find him, we will unearth him in the most secret ravine of the deepest canyon."

"And you will be careful, dearest," whispered his wife, "careful of yourself. You know I have only you now."

"Careful of my men perhaps," said Compton, smiling at her, "but in expeditions of this kind, you know, the commander must lead."

"You will watch over him, Mr. Marnette, won't you?" pleaded the wife, turning to the old hunter who was to accompany the expedition as chief-of-scouts. Marnette was never very far away from the colonel's side.

"It's like askin' me to look after a lightnin'

flash," answered the old man, smiling kindly at her, for he loved her very much and had for a long time, "an' nobody but God can really look after Colonel Compton, but I'll do my best, ma'am. I got a hunch, too, that we're goin' to bring back the little gal."

"If the colonel pleases, sor," said Molly, who was Mrs. Compton's constant and faithful attendant, "will you please, sor, thry to find out what is become of poor Danny Meagher, and if he is alive, will you tell him I am pinin' away for a sight of him?"

"That I will, Molly," said the colonel, looking kindly into her pale face whence the roses had all departed. He had long since forgiven poor Molly her folly. "Now, Marion, we can't stay any longer."

He kissed his wife's cold cheek before them all in that snow-covered meadow on that bright winter morning. Then he turned to his orderly, mounted his horse, nodded to the bugler, and the clear notes of the assembly call rang over the little plain. Compton drew his sword when the regiment was formed, spoke a sharp word of command, when the cheering died away, and then all took up the march.

The band which was to stay behind with the two companies of infantry, which had been detailed to garrison the post until the Fourteenth came back, played merrily the famous battle air of the regiment. The women and children, wrapped in furs, stood in the meadow looking long after the column trotting across the clearing and disappearing among the snow-covered foothills. They were headed for the great range, somewhere in the heart of which lurked the great and redoubtable chief and his cruel warriors, like a group of savage lions in their lair.

XVII

DISCLOSES HOW DANNY MEAGHER SHOWED THEM THE WAY

NEITHER horses nor men had ever sustained such hardships or carried on a campaign under such frightful difficulties as Compton's column encountered. When they started they had been accompanied by a body of Shoshone scouts, but the intense cold, coupled with the heavy snows which filled the passes, had discouraged these Indian auxiliaries. They soon straggled away and abandoned the column. Yet they had no difficulty in their trailing, because of the skill and devotion of Marnette, who as chief-of-scouts had associated with himself a band of hardy, well-skilled, experienced frontiersmen. It resolved itself into a white man's expedition therefore.

Dull Knife and his band had concealed themselves for the winter in the hidden recesses of the mountains, which were traversed in every direction by a network of deep canyons

through many of which flowed icy rivers. The rude almost impassable trails along the sides of these rifts in the mountains at this time were covered with snow. The regiment had been out of touch with civilization for at least a week, and had penetrated far into the mountain range, before its advance was halted and scouting parties had been sent out from the permanent camp in every direction. Canyon after canyon had been examined with no results whatever. The fierce wind and the drifting snow had obliterated the trails the Cheyennes might have left. Neither scout nor soldier found a trace of them.

The other Indian bands of Sioux and Cheyennes who had been on the warpath the previous summer had been located and were under observation, but Dull Knife's band had so far remained concealed. As it had been Dull Knife's band that had carried off the colonel's daughter, Compton was certain that if alive she would be found with this group of Cheyennes; he therefore prosecuted his search with the most desperate determination.

The sufferings of the horses and the soldiers were terrible, but the troopers endured every-

thing without murmuring. They responded to every demand made on them with a cheerful enthusiasm which no cold was able to freeze out of them.

Strange pictures they presented, coming in from scout or mounted-guard duty, clad in their great snow-encrusted buffalo overcoats, huge fur caps, and gloves, with their beards and mustaches frosted with ice and snow! But it was certain to Compton that the regiment had about reached the limit of human endurance. Unless Dull Knife were soon found, if he did not wish his men to be frozen to death in that ghastly wilderness of snow and ice and withering cold, he would have to break camp and return to the fort.

Nothing had been heard from Danny Meagher. No one knew whether he was alive or dead. With despair in his heart, Compton called a council of war, which met around a huge fire in the midst of the camp.

"Gentlemen," he said, "it is evident that the men can't stand this much longer. A more cheerful, willing, courageous lot I have never commanded. They have done everything that mortal man could ask, but forage is running

low, rations are getting scarce, I dare not keep them out much longer. What do you think?"

Calmore and Dexter, who had both been promoted to majors, looked at each other. Dexter, as the younger, spoke first.

"I hate to say it, colonel, but I suppose you are right."

"Yes," added Calmore, "unless we can find them in a day or two, we shall have to move out."

"We haven't rations for more than four days longer, sir," said the commissary.

"A lot of the men are already suffering from frost-bite. If this keeps up I can't answer for the health of the command, sir," said Osmond, the major surgeon.

"Gentlemen," said the colonel, "I believe it will kill my wife if we come back without the baby."

"I know," said Calmore, speaking for all the others.

"Well," said Dexter, "you needn't decide anything to-night. We can't do anything until K troop returns."

"Marnette and Hadden started day before yesterday and were only rationed for three

days. They must be back to-night," said the colonel. "Well, gentlemen, if they don't bring a favorable report, we will break camp in the morning and go back to Fort Sullivan."

"I hate to do it," growled Calmore.

"And I," added Dexter.

"And think what it means to me," said the colonel. "Yet I have no option, I can't let these men freeze to death."

Just before dark that night, Hadden and his troop came in. They were covered with frost and snow, and some of the men were freezing. The poor horses were in a state of complete exhaustion, they had covered miles of intricate trails, but had found nothing. Disconsolately, dejectedly, they made their report to the colonel.

"He is in there somewheres, curse him," said old Marnette, brushing the ice from his face with both hands and warming himself by the camp fire. "We've jest got to find him."

"I am afraid we can't do it now, old friend," said Compton. "We have rations and forage enough just about to get us back to Fort Sullivan. The men can't stand this any more."

"But they've jest *got* to stand it," said old

Marnette stubbornly. "I'll never go back to the fort and face your wife without that babby, or tidings of her, as long as I can set a horse or pull a trigger."

"That is all very well for you, Marnette, but I am responsible for the lives of these men and the safety of this command. If I were alone I would stay here in these mountains with you until we died before we gave up."

"Colonel," said Calmore, who was standing by, "give us one more day; we could stretch our supplies to cover five days by going on short rations. I know the men, they will take a long chance at starvation before they will go back beaten. I know the United States, too, and the people of this country have got their eyes on this column. We can't afford to go back unsuccessful."

"Let me ascertain the feeling of the men," said Compton.

Leaving the little group around the headquarters fire, the colonel walked from one troop camp to another. What he said to the first, he said in effect to them all; it ran something like this, the men crowding around him to listen:

“Men, we know Dull Knife is in the mountains somewhere, but we haven’t yet found him. We’ve got four days’ rations and forage left, which we might stretch to cover five or six. You have shown a courage and devotion and willingness to do everything that men could that’s beyond all praise. As I am responsible for you, I ought to break camp and march back to Fort Sullivan to-morrow. But, although I can’t bear to give up, which isn’t the habit of the Fourteenth Cavalry, I feel that I cannot keep you here unless you are willing to stay. I will make a return party out of those who want to go back. With the rest, I’ll stay in the mountains to the very limit of safety and possibility, and beyond. Who wants to go back?”

The troop he was addressing was that of which old Schmidt was first sergeant.

“Gott in Himmel! ve vill shtay mit you, colonel, ain’t it, boys?” he began fiercely.

“Sergeant’s right, sir,” exclaimed a trooper.

“We’ll live a week on them four days’ provisions,” said another.

“We won’t go back without making a kill-

ing of Dull Knife's braves," boldly cried a third.

"All who vill shtay fall in line und shtandt at adention," growled old Schmidt.

The whole body fell in line instantly. Not a single man even hesitated. The colonel's eyes shone with pleasure.

"You are a body of soldiers and gentlemen," he said, gravely saluting them, "that any man on earth would be honored to command. There are no better men in this army or in any other army, I am sure."

What happened in that troop happened in all the others; there was not a single officer or man who wanted to go back. The whole regiment, five hundred strong, had volunteered.

"I knowd how 't would be," said Marnette, after they had thoroughly talked it over; "them fellers is game an' grit down to their heels, you couldn't freeze it out of 'em at the north pole, an' you couldn't burn it out of 'em in hell either."

"What do you advise now?" asked the colonel. "You know we've got to make it this time."

Old Marnette thought deeply, so much depended upon him that he would fain give no hasty judgment. At last he spoke, carefully weighing his words.

“We’ve sent out three scoutin’ parties an’ we’ve done the northeast pretty well, but we’ve kind a neglected the s’uthern part, not thinkin’ of Dull Knife gittin’ down so near the settlements. Mebbe he’s counted on that, an’ is down in there somewheres waitin’ for the spring to break up the snow an’ give him a chance to git north an’ join the Sioux in the open country where there’s good buffaler huntin’ still. Let’s try to the s’uth’ard.”

“Your advice is good,” said Compton. “I think I will send out three different parties to scout south; you will take one, Grouard another, and——”

“Let me have the third,” said Calmore. “You know I know this game about as well as anybody, except yourself and——”

“Good,” answered the colonel. “We will detail a lieutenant and twenty men to go with each leader, take the best men and the best horses in the regiment. We will give you three days; at the end of that time you must

be back, that's the limit of our endurance. Meanwhile I'll try to organize some hunting parties to see if we can't get some game to eke out our rations."

"I've got a hunch," said Marnette, "that we are goin' to git him this time."

The little colloquy was broken by a rifle shot from the farthest sentry to the westward, who was stationed where he could command a view of the pass through which raced a little brook so furiously that even the intense cold had not yet frozen it. It was quite dark by this time and Colonel Compton with the other officers of the staff hurried to the picket line. A short distance away, seen dimly in the dusk and falling snow, stood a solitary Indian, wrapped in a blanket, an eagle feather rising from his head.

"What is it?" asked the colonel of the officer of the guard.

"There's an Indian out there, sir," answered Lieutenant Alderdice. "He seems to want to speak to us, but I have ordered him to stay where he was, not to make a move under pain of death. He has been hallooing at us—there he goes again."

There was a lull in the wind at the time, and for the first time since he had hailed the voice of the Indian was plainly audible to them all.

"Don't shoot," came faintly. "I'm a white man."

"That's no Indian," said Compton. "I seem to know that voice."

"And I," exclaimed Dexter.

"That will be Meagher," cried Calmore.

The colonel darted past the sentinel and pushed through the snow, with Calmore following.

"Keep them both covered," ordered Dexter, who remained with the officer of the guard, "and if it should prove to be an Indian and there is any treachery, give him a bullet at the first move."

But there was no treachery, the Indian dropped his blanket as the colonel drew near and those who covered him saw him salute, and the next instant the colonel had him by the hand, shaking it furiously.

"Meagher," he cried, "is it you?"

"It is, sor."

"And Marion?"

“Safe an’ well, sor, at this minute.”

“Where is she?”

“As near as I can judge, sor, she’s about fifteen miles away in Dull Knife’s village.

“Not up this canyon?” asked the colonel. “We scouted that carefully when we first came.”

“You missed the little canyon that leads off from it, sor, about eight miles up an’ about six into the heart of the mountains. Dull Knife is there.”

“Can you lead us to the spot?”

“I am afraid not, sor. I have got to be back before marnin’, they don’t quite thrust me yit. I’m supposed to be on a hunt, an’ if I’m not there in the marnin’, they might do some harrum to the child.”

“Can’t you guide us there?”

“I could, sor, but I’d better not.”

“Why not?”

“Well, you see, sor, I can tell you the way so that you can find it yourselves. I know a thrail over the range an’ I can cut across the country an’ git to the camp long before you do. I’d better be there when you attack, for there’s no telling what they might do to the

child if they get a chance when the troops burst in on them."

"How many are there?"

"Over six hundred, sor."

"Braves?"

"Yes, sor, an women an' children besides. Dull Knife has found a regular hole in the wall, a pocket where they are camped, there is only wan way in an' another way out."

"Thank God, she is alive. Have they mistreated her?"

"No, sor, she is rather a pet of the chafe, he's dressed her out in buckskin an' even had a little war bonnet made for her, for all she's a girl."

"Is she well?"

"Well an' happy as she can be, save for wantin' her mother, sor."

"How did you escape?"

"You see, sor, the lasht man that fired at me as I run across the meadow came near to gittin' me. As it happened I shtumbled an' fell jist as he pulled the trigger, the bullet cut across the back of me skull, an' stunned me."

"It was a lucky stumble," said the colonel.
"That was Marnette."

“Glory be!” cried Danny.

“And what happened next?”

“When I came to I was in the midst of ’em, sor, an’ they was debatin’ how they’d kill me. I tould ’em I was desartin’ on account of bad thratemint at your hands, sor. There was a half-brade interpretin’ for ’em. But I doubt I’d ’a’ been kilt entirely if it hadn’t been for the babby, sor.”

“What did she do?”

“She broke away from the squaws that was kapin’ her an’ run to me where I was lyin’ bound that tight I couldn’t move hand or foot an’ me thinkin’ it was all up an’ bein’ more sorry for Mrs. Compton than meself, so help me God.”

“I know, I know.”

“Well, sor, the child was already afther winnin’ old Dull Knife’s heart wid her swate ways, an’ now ’tis nothin’ he can deny her. All the papposes in the camp is jealous av her. You should see her lord it over ’em, sor.”

“Go on, go on.”

“Well, sor, she ups an’ runs to me, an’ takes me head in her little arrums an’ sez,

‘My Danny,’ jest as brave, sor, ‘I want Danny to play wid me.’ An’ the upshot of it all was that afther questionin’ me they adopted me into the thribe in a sort av way an’ give me the job of lookin’ afther the babby. I got to be awful careful, too, sor, for old Dull Knife’s that jealous. He’s larned that it is the same babby he nearly got from us all in the Big Meadows an’ that makes thim think more av her than iver.”

“There is some good in him, then.”

“Not much, sor, if you could hear the things I’ve heard av battle an’ murder an’ outrage. Begorry, sor, it makes me blood run could. I’m afraid always the old villain may take a notion to kill her. ’Tis more than wan babby’s scalp he’s got. But ’tis a long shtory to tell all av it——”

“You’re right. We haven’t time to hear more of that story now, Meagher, terribly interesting as it is. You say you will go back over the mountains?”

“Yes, sor, ’tis only about tin miles that way. If you could shpare me a squad of men that can climb like goats, I’ll take them back wid me an’ they will come in handy. I’ll put

them on the hill while I go down into the valley to me tepee."

"You shall have them," said the colonel. "Let us go back now."

When the two men reached the camp they were greeted with a ringing outburst of cheers; although Danny was painted like an Indian and dressed as one, his comrades recognized him.

"Men," said the colonel, "Meagher has given us the location of the Indian camp. We are going up the canyon to-night, we will hit them in the morning. Meagher wants some men who can climb like goats and who can stand a hard march, to go with him to take a position on the hills overlooking the camp. Who will volunteer?"

"I for one," cried Hadden. "My horses are dead beat now and my whole troop will go afoot if you will let us."

"Good," said Compton. "Let every man of the troop that wishes to go with you, Mr. Hadden; the rest of you saddle up and get ready to move out. We'll take every man jack that can go, leaving the sick and the wagon train with the teamsters. The chief

teamster can command the camp. We ought to strike the hostiles by morning."

"Tain't up the canyon yere, is it?" asked Marnette.

"No," answered Danny, "after you have gone about eight miles up, there's a narrow little drift in the mountains——"

"I've seen it," said Marnette. "I didn't know it led anywhere."

"Well, it does," said Danny. "If you follow that canyon for a mile, you come to a broader pass an' if you follow that for five miles more, over the range, you come to one of them holes, pockets that is, as level as a floor, and big enough for a brigade camp. There ain't nobody knows of it except the Cheyennes. Once there an' you've got 'em."

"I know it now," said Marnette. "I have heard of it; strange I was such a dumb fool as to forgit it. It's the best place in the whole Big Horn Range for Dull Knife to lie concealed."

" 'Tis indeed," said Danny. "Now I'd better go back to the camp, wid the colonel's permission, sor."

"You have it," answered Compton.

"It's a cold night, sor," said Danny suggestively.

"Here," laughed the colonel, handing him his own flask, "we haven't got much of that stuff, Meagher, but what we have you are welcome to."

"We are all ready, Meagher," said Mr. Hadden, coming up with his trooper behind him.

"All right, sor," said Meagher. "Plaise may I ask the colonel one question afore I go?"

"A dozen if you want," answered Compton promptly.

"How's Molly, sor."

"Well, I believe. She's back at the fort with Mrs. Compton and the rest, praying every hour on her knees for you and our success."

"Thank you, sor. Afther I have sarved my term for me neglected juty," said Danny, "if I'm not shot, I'll ask the colonel's permission to marry her."

"You have it now," returned the colonel.

"Thank you again, sor," said Danny, gratefully beaming on his commander.

“Good-bye,” said Compton, extending his hand. Meagher shook it, awkwardly saluted, and turned away followed by Hadden.

It was quite dark now and the men filed by, in the light snow that was falling, like grey ghosts. In a minute the line halted and Danny turned and came back.

“If you please, sor, I’ll be afther wearin’ a white buffalo robe when the ould Fourteenth raches the camp that belongs to Dull Knife. It’s the only one in the camp, but I can git it. Will you kindly pass the worrd among the bhoys not to fire at any one wearin’ a white buffalo robe. I’m apt to be in the thick av it wid the little girl; ’tis not so much for meself I’m carin’.”

“Good. We will watch out for you, Meagher,” said the colonel.

“Thank you, sor,” and he was gone again, and in less than a minute Hadden and his troop had disappeared.

It took ten minutes perhaps for the rest of the regiment to get in line and move out. The sick, the frozen, the snow-blind and the invalids were left behind with the wagon train, all deploring the hard fate that deprived them



THEY PLUNGED DESPERATELY ON IN THE DRIFTING SNOW

of the chance of participating in this desperate adventure.

With Compton and Marnette at their head, the troopers saddled their horses and started up the trail in a column of fours. They went slowly, but they plunged desperately on in the drifting snow and the bitter night.

XVIII

HOW THEY ADVANCED IN THE COLD HELL OF THE PASS

FOR hours the troops plodded slowly and painfully up the canyon. Sometimes the icy, snow-covered trail, not a good one under most favorable conditions, narrowed so that it was necessary for the long column to pass over it in single file. Frequently they crossed from one side of the canyon to the other on huge boulders lying in the bed of the stream which would have been absolutely impossible for the horses had not the space between been filled with masses of ice, beneath which the low torrent ran.

Fortunately when they got well within the canyon, it stopped snowing, the wind died down, and about ten o'clock at night the full moon burst from the clouds and gave them abundance of light, save where the towering walls of the pass, sometimes rising several

thousand feet, threw the trail far beneath into deep shadow.

In spite of their precautions, there were many accidents. Horses stumbled and fell into the river, carrying men with them. In one instance a trooper was dashed against a wall of rock and killed. Although the wind and snow had both ceased, the cold was intense. Only the most heroic resolution, the most indomitable persistence, animating their otherwise frigid hearts enabled the troops to sustain it. They plodded along silently, Marnette, with the colonel, in the lead. Conversation was so painful as to be almost impossible and speech was only resorted to in direst necessity. The old scout seemed to have an unerring faculty of picking out the most practicable places for the slow advance of the freezing command. Whenever the canyon opened into a little pocket as it did sometimes, the troops were halted and assembled, stragglers were brought up and order was restored.

It was one o'clock in the cold still winter morning when they reached the narrow entrance of the transverse glacial canyon which led to the "hole," where Dull Knife had con-

cealed himself. It was a mere rift in the wall, as if some titanic hand had cleft it with some mighty blade from the lofty rim to the abysmal depth far below. The narrow entrance, scarcely affording passage to a horse and rider, looked grim and terrible. It was, of course, too deep for any light from the moon to penetrate and seemed like a thin black scar in the face of the ice-bound wall of the pass.

No wonder the scouts had passed it by unheeded, when they had before examined this canyon. The walls here towered at least fifteen hundred feet above the trail and the opening was a mere thread. A closer inspection showed that the lateral canyon also bent sharply about a hundred feet from its intersection with the greater pass and unless a very careful examination of the spot was made, it looked more like a niche or scarred recess in the face of the mountain than anything else.

The main pass was here a little wider than ordinarily and trees grew on the banks of the stream, which was fortunate for the soldiers, for otherwise they would have been compelled to ford the icy torrent, which would

have been difficult, perhaps impossible. Axes had been brought along and soon four huge pines lay across the brook. By means of this improvised bridge, the command presently reached the other side. The strongest troopers under Major Dexter briefly scouted the narrow pass and returning reported it was empty. Indeed all the veteran fighters knew that no Indian on the continent would be abroad on such a night if it could possibly be avoided. The troops were certain they would not be under observation, therefore they cleared a little space in the snow and by means of dry pine branches a huge fire was soon kindled, coffee was made for the men, and the horses were watered and given a scanty feeding.

It was two o'clock in the morning when they started, Marnette again in the lead. The new canyon was so narrow, and ran in such a direction that it was almost pitch dark within it. Fortunately the brook, which ran through it in the spring, summer, and fall, had either been dried up before the winter set in, or it had been frozen solid; the snow too was as hard as iron, so the going was easier—other-

wise it would have been impossible. The black rocks jutting out of the white crest were easily discerned and avoided by the twisting, stumbling, ever-mounting column.

There were a dozen places in the winding, turning, climbing trail through the mountains where a dozen men could have held the pass against a thousand, but there were no men there. Dull Knife was confident that his retreat would be undiscovered, and had no idea that there were any troops on earth which would have the hardihood to struggle up the frost-bound canyon on such a night in such weather. Doubtless he felt as safe as if he had been in Gibraltar, had he known anything about that famous fortress. But he was to learn before the morning of what the American soldier was capable, and that the polar temperature itself could not congeal him, or his horse either.

The rare cold grew more and more intense as the trail through the canyon—if such it could be called—mounted gradually upward. They attained a height of nine thousand feet in this narrow pass before they began to descend. Once in it they had to go on, as there

was nothing else to be done. To stop was to die, to turn back would be to perish miserably. There was salvation in the advance, and nowhere else. They had to seize Dull Knife's camp to get rest, food, and fire.

With bent heads they plodded mechanically on, keeping together by a sort of instinctive coherence, obedient to habit acquired through long years of soldiering. Often they had to dismount and lead their horses for long distances. This relieved the horses and in a measure warmed the men.

Only the most heroic care on the part of the officers prevented straggling; benumbed, dazed men seeking occasion to drop from their horses and lie down to sleep and die. Some of them did succeed in getting away from the column unobserved in the darkness, and were seen no more. But the great majority struggled desperately on. The horrors of that winter march of Compton's men were never forgotten by the army. It was a tale to tell around warm firesides on wild winter nights.

After they had passed the high point, and the descent began, the temperature grew a little more bearable; but it was still fright-

fully severe. Conversation was, of course, practically impossible, yet some there were whose positions and duties compelled them to speak with frozen lips.

“We must be near,” said Marnette to the colonel at last.

He was an unerring judge of distance and he was certain that they must now be close to the place that Meagher described.

The colonel raised his head, he also lifted his hand, those nearest him stopped and then those farther away; it needed but a suggestion to bring the whole long column, which came crowding slowly onward, to a halt. The panting horses were too exhausted to move. There was neither shaking of heads, nor pawing of hoofs, nor jingling of bits. Their riders leaned over their saddles as motionless as the canyon walls. The officers slowly crowded to the front near the colonel. Clouds of mist from many breaths of men and animals hung undisturbed above them in the stillness of that terrible morning.

What had stopped them was soon apparent. In that thin air, in that intense cold, sound carried a long distance. They heard a dog

bark! They were near the Indian camp evidently. It was about half past four in the morning. Through a rift in the range they saw the whitish gray of the dawn. As they listened the dogs barked again.

“Gentlemen,” said Compton, “Dull Knife’s lair.”

The words seemed to put new vigor into the troopers. One would have said, as they reeled down the trail, they seemed to be at the last gasp of human endurance. Yet it was really not so; these men had still some reserve force. The colonel’s three words had called it into action.

“Carbines and revolvers,” said Compton.

He loosened his own pistol in its holster and unslung the carbine he carried across his shoulders in common with the other officers and men, and dropped it lightly in front of him across his saddle. Without a word the men did the same, although his and their hands were so benumbed, in spite of thick fur gloves they all wore, that their fingers would scarcely do their work.

“We will jump the village the minute we see it,” he continued. “Keep fast the sabre

until we come close to them. Do you understand?"

A hoarse, snarling growl of assent came from those nearest, and both word and response were passed down the long ranks until the weakest stragglers at the other end heard and were inspired by them. The men's wordless answer was beast-like, perhaps, but only men could have given utterance at all.

"I'll ride for'ard to the bend in the pass," said Marnette, pointing ahead about a quarter of a mile, "and see how things lay."

"Go ahead," said the colonel.

Like a white-frosted rime-covered ghost, Marnette ventured ahead. He dismounted when he reached the bend and plodded out of sight on foot. He was back in a few minutes, meeting the command slowly advancing as he came.

"I couldn't keep them still longer, they were freezing to death," explained the colonel. "We had to move."

Marnette nodded.

"They are there," he said. "The trail breaks sharp to the right an' opens into a beautiful pocket, wide enough for the hull

regiment to form line. The village is under the north bluff, facin' south, an' the pony herd is to the south an' below. Fires are almost out, there's no watch, everybody is in the tepees asleep. They don't dream there's a soldier within a hundred miles of 'em."

"Good," said the colonel. "He turned and rode back along the line, the men had by this time got themselves into column of fours. "Calmore," said the colonel, stopping at the head of the first squadron. "Detach one troop to pass around the village to the left to try to capture the pony herd."

"Captain Emmett," said Calmore, "to you that duty."

"Very good, sir."

"The rest of the squadron will form line the instant they debouch from the pass and ride through the village, driving the Cheyennes before them. Be careful of the women and children, one of the latter may be my own," said Compton.

"I understand, sir," answered Calmore.

"Don't fire on an Indian wearing a white blanket if you can help it; that may be Meagher."

"We will take good care."

"I know you will, Calmore," said the colonel, riding down toward Dexter's squadron, which brought up the rear.

"God give us luck, sir," cried Calmore, after his superior as he rode away.

The instructions to Calmore were repeated to Dexter, save that the latter was directed to hold his rear troop as a reserve to be thrown into action whenever circumstances might determine.

"Close up," said the colonel, "let's have no straggling; and now," he continued, raising his voice, "let every man make his peace with God, and do his best."

There was no cheering, only that low muttering, ominous growl again. The colonel reached his place at the head of the line and glanced back.

"Forward," he said softly, and the march at once began.

The wind was blowing toward them from the camp. They could hear the dogs again. But as yet it was only desultory barking, for the Indian curs had not yet scented them, what wind there was blowing in the faces of

the soldiers. The trail was now broad and smooth.

“Trot-march,” cried the colonel.

The pace was accelerated, the rapid movement warmed them a little, they went faster, they forgot for a moment the awful gripping cold, the trot grew more rapid until they reached the bend in the trail and looked down into the valley. The camp and hundreds of tepees lay before them. Faint smoke rose from dying fires here and there among the tents, but not a human soul was visible. They caught sight of a dog slinking from tepee to tepee. Emmett, preserving his column formation, now broke to the left and galloped off toward the pony herd, the rest formed into line in the open on the double-quick.

The dogs in the village scented them at last, a wild howl and a furious barking rose on all sides, tepee flaps were instantly thrown aside, heads peered out sleepily, to awaken into full life and action in a second.

“Charge!” roared Compton with all the vigor he could command.

XIX

THE WINTER FIGHT

THE horses' hoofs thundered on the hard snow. The men cheered. Their blood was up. It seemed warmer.

The village was suddenly red with naked men. The Indian sleeps without clothing beneath his blankets and furs, even in the coldest weather. Every brave had at least a cartridge belt and a Winchester. There was some distance between the mouth of the pass and the village, the galloping horses had not traversed it when a sudden crashing outburst of sound filled the valley. This was followed by a steady crackling as every rifle in the hands of five hundred braves was discharged at first with one volley as it were by instinct, followed by a rapid storm of bullets which swept across the snowy level. But the Cheyennes only just awakened from sleep, and not good shots at best, did not do the execution with their hasty firing which might have been expected, con-

sidering the closeness of the range and the largeness of the target.

It was impossible to miss entirely, however, soldiers threw up their arms and fell here and there, while horses went crashing down on the snow. The firing of the Indians was as ineffective to stop that rush as dust thrown at a storm.

The next instant the troops were among the tepees, and the rattle of their carbines and the sharper staccato notes of their revolvers showed how quickly they got to work. But the courage of the Cheyennes was magnificent. After their first surprise they rallied splendidly. The onrush of the charge was checked by the thick huddle of the Indian tents. The Indians withdrew to the lower end of the village and then desperately, stubbornly, kept up the fighting.

It was difficult to use the horses to advantage. Compton gave the order to dismount and then led a rush directly upon the Indians. The fighting was of the hand-to-hand type. The Indians were naked just as they had come forth. If they lost that camp they knew that their condition in the frozen mountain range

would be frightful. They must conquer or die. Old Dull Knife exposed himself recklessly and both he and all his men fought as only the northern Cheyennes—bravest of all savages—braver even than the Sioux—could. Dull Knife was a villain, blood-thirsty, cruel, depraved, as were the men he led, but no one could deny their courage. Sabres had been left with the horses, and carbines were clubbed. It was gun butt against tomahawk and scalping knife, white arm against red one.

The colonel had been looking eagerly everywhere for his baby, the troopers had ridden over numbers of Indian women, some fighting as desperately as the men, but the most of them fleeing to the side, with their children, to get out of the way of the battle, but there had been no sign of the little white baby anywhere. Suddenly from out the Indian ranks a man wearing a white buffalo robe and carrying a child in his arms burst into the open space between the soldiers and the Cheyennes.

“Meagher!” exclaimed the colonel.

There had been a little temporary cessation in the combat for a moment, while the rival

fighters gathered themselves for a final struggle.

“Hold your fire,” cried Compton to his men.

The soldiers dropped the carbines they had presented at the advancing figure. But the Indians recognized at once what was up and a storm of bullets swept toward Meagher. He had foreseen it and just before the volley he ran swiftly to one side toward the narrow wall of the valley, which here rose sheer above the camp. He threw himself against the wall, thrust the child behind him, and stood defiant. Winchester and revolver in hand. He was yelling like a madman, as his barbaric Celtic forbears had done in many a battle of the past.

It was daylight now and the soldiers and Indians alike saw him plainly. With a whoop of rage the great Cheyenne chief made for him, with others of his following. Colonel Compton started at full speed for him also and the whole regiment followed to a man.

The Indians were naked, or very lightly clad, while the soldiers were in heavy marching order and further encumbered by great fur overcoats. The Indians had much the

shorter distance to traverse, too, and they reached Meagher the more quickly.

Danny Meagher did not wait for them. His rifle cracked again and again as they came on, until the magazine was empty, then his revolver spat into their faces. He received a half dozen wounds, but the blood of the fighting Irish had not yet been drained from his veins. Battling with the savage ferocity of the Indians themselves, he leaped toward the red horde, his gun rising and falling like a flail. Then they grappled him, pulling him down as big grey wolves pull down a fighting buffalo. The next second the troopers were upon them.

The whole open was filled with a twisting, struggling mass. The advantage was not always with the soldiers in this hand-to-hand fighting, but the superior weight and more desperate courage of the white race finally told.

The Indians were driven back. Dull Knife, fighting in the front, had received a dozen wounds. Then they broke and fled, struggling down the open toward the narrows at the farther end. There was not a solitary pony



COLONEL COMPTON CLASPED THE BABY IN HIS ARMS

for the chief even. Emmett had rounded up the herd, not without some fighting, for a little section of the village with many braves had been pitched upon the other side.

The soldiers sought to follow, but encumbered as they were, they were no match in speed for the Indians, and for the moment Colonel Compton had forgotten everything but Danny Meagher and his precious burden.

Little Miss Marion, too frightened to cry out, they found to be absolutely unhurt. She was dressed in buckskins and feathers, her little face smeared with paint, but she was alive and well. Colonel Compton clasped her in his arms and then turned to look at Meagher. He was a gory-looking spectacle, his white blanket cut and torn to rags and covered with blood welling from wounds on his broad breast. Yet he was conscious still.

"I got her," said he. "Leftenant Hadden will be along presently. Sure 'tis dyin' I am, but you'll give me back me place in the regiment, sor."

"That I will, my brave boy," said the colonel.

"And you'll tell—Molly," faltered Danny,

and then he closed his eyes, and lapsed into unconsciousness.

“Major Osmond,” cried Compton.

“Here, sir,” said the chief regimental surgeon, forcing his way to his superior’s side.

“Look after this man. Do your best.”

And Osmond dropped to his knees beside the unconscious soldier.

The next moment the crashing fire began again. The chief had taken advantage of the respite—for the men had crowded around the colonel and Meagher and had burst into a cheering at the sight of the baby—and had rallied his men in the narrow mouth of the canyon, which continued the trail. From this opening and from behind a natural entrenchment of rocks he opened fire. The Indians were doing more, Dull Knife had not fought in Crazy Horse’s school without learning something. He was not beaten yet. There were practicable trails ascending the wall to the south, he detached part of his men to scale it, and from high points, inaccessible to the troops in the village, poured in a dropping and disastrous fire.

“Get into line,” roared the colonel, quickly

disposing his baby by the side of the gallant soldier who had fought for her and the surgeon who was looking after him. "We must rush the pass."

Seconded by their officers, the troops were soon taking their positions coolly, though under a galling fire. At command they advanced, but were met by such a heavy fire from the Indians behind the rocks as for the moment checked them. The line staggered, wavered, and came to a halt. Compton, Calmore, Dexter, and the other officers leaped to the front.

"We've got to do it," the colonel cried. "Nothing is gained as long as they are there. Forward—forward."

"For the honor of the Fourteenth," roared Calmore.

The men took a surge forward, they bent their heads as they had bent them before the driving snow and came on, but whether they would have succeeded in dislodging the four hundred surviving Cheyennes, over one hundred of them already having been killed, was a grave question.

The colonel, emptying his revolver toward the Indians, looked upward, half in prayer,

half in hope of seeing something of Hadden. At that instant, as if in answer to his unspoken appeal, the rim of the canyon was filled with men. By a lucky chance Hadden—whom Meagher had left behind—struck the “hole” just where the further pass ran out of it, where the Cheyennes had elected to make their stand. The excited men, seeing the whole course of the battle beneath them, threw themselves face down on the brink and opened fire at point-blank range into the rear and on the flank of the Cheyennes. The sound of the first shot from above quickened the troops below, and the next instant they were among the rocks firing and fighting hand-to-hand again.

Dull Knife, tomahawk in hand, sprang at Compton who was leading. The great war chief was covered with wounds and was a gory spectacle. Pealing a war cry, he lifted his hatchet. Compton was weaponless, but closing with the Indian, he fell upon him with all his hundred and seventy-five pounds of bone and sinew and struck him on the side of the head a terrible blow with his fist. Dull Knife staggered, and Marnette, who was ever by the

side of the colonel, put a knife through the old chief's heart. The rest of the Indians broke and ran, followed by devastating shots from the soldiers.

Two hundred and fifty Indians had been killed, the remainder got away. They were naked, shelterless, and freezing, adrift in the mountains.

The battle was over, and Compton was astonished to discover that he was in a profuse perspiration in spite of the cold.

EPILOGUE

IN WHICH IT IS CLEARLY SEEN THAT ALL ENDS WELL

THERE is little more to add. Victory had been complete. Dull Knife had been killed and his band, as an organized force, annihilated. His women and children in the camp were in the hands of Compton. The surviving braves, suffering incredible hardships during which many perished from cold, struggled on, over the mountains and through the passes until they could join other bodies of Indians more fortunate than themselves.

The camp was destroyed, every tepee was burned with all the supplies, save just enough to ration the troops and captives on their return march to the camp and Fort Sullivan. The Indian women and children, numbering several hundred, were mounted on the captured ponies and the rest of the herd shot. This was cruel work, but the soldiers knew

only one way to deal with Indians in that day, and that was, to exterminate them and all their belongings.

The men were allowed to rest until noon, warming themselves by the huge fires and eating their fill of the winter's store of buffalo meat, which Dull Knife's band had provided.

Hadden's men, who had made a fearful march over the snow-covered mountains, and who looked it, were also mounted on the Indian ponies for their return. The regiment had lost thirty-five killed and they had nearly a hundred wounded, such had been the fierceness of the close hand-to-hand conflict. Two officers were among the killed and three among the wounded.

Meagher was the object of the colonel's most intense solicitude. If they could get him to the fort the surgeon said that he would recover. They made travois for the least dangerously wounded and litters for those more severely hurt, and with incredible love and labor they carried them down the pass.

Late at night they reached the base camp. On the way they found several of their comrades who had straggled from the line and had

been frozen to death with their horses, ghastly monuments, covered with ice and snow, of the human and brutal resolution which had struggled on until death intervened.

The journey back to Fort Sullivan, terrible as it was, seemed easy compared to what they had undergone; and a week after they broke camp the column marched falteringly through the main gate and then was dismissed to the arms of its women.

A courier had gone on ahead, the indomitable Marnette whom no hardships or anxieties could daunt, and the old scout in great joy had told the young mother, whom he loved, the story of the rescue of her daughter. Marnette would not have missed the chance for anything. Marion Compton met her husband at the gate and took the baby from his arms to her heart. For the first time the colonel had to take the second place, but only for a little while. Molly, who was close behind, in obedience to the colonel's gesture, went to the side of Danny Meagher's litter, bent over it sobbing, and kissed him boldly before them all.

Charges against Meagher were, of course, dismissed. A sergeant of C troop had been

among the killed, and Meagher was promoted, and when he recovered there was such a wedding in the post as the rank and file had never seen, the colonel himself giving away the bride. And no sweeter woman ever gave her heart and hand to a trooper than Molly McNeil. Mrs. Compton had made the wedding-dress, and, unprecedented honor, the bachelor, Major Calmore himself, acted as Meagher's best man.

"You see," he said, "Meagher has been with me in so many tight places it was only fair for me to see him through this."

And there were no prouder and happier guests at the wedding than Sergeant McNeil and Bridget, who had got a leave of absence from the bank to come back to the post and the old friends of the regiment. The men of B troop gave the young couple a rousing send-off as they took the ambulance to the train for a wedding journey for which Colonel Compton provided the wherewithal.

Little Marion had many stories to tell of her captivity. The Indians had used her well, even the great Dull Knife had condescended to exhibit his fondness for her from time to

time, a great concession from a great warrior who did not usually trouble himself much about a child, especially a girl!

She had picked up many words and phrases during her sojourn in the tepees and one of her favorite tricks was to strike her little breast with a gesture, in exact imitation of the Indian manner, and say:

“My Fader, Heap Big Chief!”

It was an assertion that no one in the regiment had the least desire to dispute.

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